

Any questions about Opus Dei?

A series of questions from journalists about Opus Dei, answered by its founder St Josemaria Escriva, and published in the book *Conversations with Msgr. Escriva* (1968).

09/24/2013

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1- How and why did you found Opus Dei?

2- What is Opus Dei's basic mission and what are its aims?

3- In speaking about Opus Dei you have sometimes called it an “organized disorganization.” What did you mean?

4- How has Opus Dei developed and changed since it was founded?

5- How do you see Opus Dei in the future?

6- Is Opus Dei involved in economics or politics?

7- Some of Opus Dei's members have important positions in business, politics, private enterprise, etc. To what extent is Opus Dei itself

involved in these people's activities or positions?

8- Some people talk about Opus Dei's "secrets", and think that it is organized along the lines of a secret society. What is your response?

9- How do you judge Opus Dei's success or otherwise?

10- Did the atmosphere in Spain from the 1940s to the 1970s contribute to Opus Dei's growth?

... and St Josemaria answered

1. How and why did you found Opus Dei?

Why? The only explanation for things that are born of God's will is that He has wanted to use them as an expression of His desire to save all men. From the first moment, the Work was universal, catholic. It was born not to solve the concrete

problems facing Europe in the twenties, but to tell men and women of every country and of every condition, race, language, milieu and state in life (single, married, widowed or priest) that they can love and serve God without giving up their ordinary work, their family life and their normal social relations.

How was it founded? Without any human means. I was a twenty-six year old priest with nothing but God's grace and good humour. The Work was born very small. It was only a young priest's desire to do what God asked of him.

Milestones? For me every time the Work helps a soul to draw closer to God and therefore become more of a brother of his fellow men it is an important milestone in the history of Opus Dei.

I could also mention some crucial dates. Although they may not be the

most important, I will give you a few approximate ones by memory. Early in 1935 we were ready to begin working in France, as a matter of fact in Paris. But then the Spanish Civil War broke out, and afterwards the Second World War and we had to put off the expansion of the Work.

But since expansion was necessary, the delay was minimal. In 1940 our work in Portugal began. After a few preliminary trips in previous years, practically coinciding with the end of the hostilities, it began in England, Italy, France, the United States and Mexico. Afterwards the rhythm of growth and expansion became more rapid. From 1949/1950 on: in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Argentina, Canada, Venezuela and the other European and South American countries. Simultaneously we began in other continents: North Africa, Japan, Kenya and the other East African

countries, in Australia, the Philippines, and Nigeria.

I also like to recall the numerous occasions on which the Popes have shown more tangibly their affection for our Work. I have resided in Rome since 1946, so I have been fortunate enough to know Pius XII, John XXIII and Paul VI personally. All three of them always showed truly paternal affection for us.

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2. What is Opus Dei's basic mission and what are its aims?

Opus Dei aims to encourage people of every sector of society to desire holiness in the midst of the world. In other words, Opus Dei proposes to help ordinary citizens like yourself to lead a fully Christian life, without modifying their normal way of life, their daily work, their aspirations and ambitions.

As I wrote years ago, you could say that Opus Dei is as old and as new as the Gospel. It intends to remind Christians of the wonderful words of Genesis: God created man to work. We try to imitate the example of Christ, who spent almost all his life on earth working as a carpenter in a small town. Work is one of the highest human values and the way in which men contribute to the progress of society. But even more, it is a way to holiness.

With what other organisations can Opus Dei be compared? That question is not easy to answer. When one compares organisations which have spiritual aims, there is always a risk of considering external features or juridical status to the detriment of what is more important, the spirit that animates them and is the *raison d'être* of all their activities.

I shall merely say that with respect to the organisations you mentioned, Opus Dei is very far removed from religious orders and secular institutes and closer to institutions like the Holy Name Society.

Opus Dei is an international lay organisation to which a certain number of secular priests belong, although they are a small minority. Its members are people who live in the world and hold normal jobs.

They do not join Opus Dei to give up their job. On the contrary, what they look for in the Work is the spiritual help they need to sanctify their ordinary work. Thus their work becomes a means to sanctify themselves and help others to do the same thing. They do not change their status. They continue being single, married, widowed or priests. What they try to do is serve God and their fellow men in their own state in life. Opus Dei is not interested in vows or

promises. It asks its members to make an effort to practise human and Christian virtues, as children of God, despite the limitations and errors that are inevitable in human life.

If you want a point of comparison, the easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow citizens. The members of Opus Dei are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world just as they did before they joined. There is nothing false or artificial about their behaviour. They live like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of his faith, because that is what they are.

3. In speaking about Opus Dei you have sometimes called it an “organized disorganization.” What did you mean?

I mean that in our apostolate we give primary and fundamental importance to the spontaneity of the individual, to free and responsible initiative guided by the action of the Spirit, and not to organisational structures and tactics imposed from above, from the seat of government.

There is obviously a minimum of organisation, with a central government, which always acts collegially and has its seat in Rome, and regional governments which are also collegiate, each headed by a Counsellor. But all the activity of these organisms is directed fundamentally to one task: to provide the members with the spiritual assistance necessary for

their life of piety, and an adequate spiritual, doctrinal, religious and human formation. And then, off you go! That is to say, Christians, sanctify all the paths of men, for all bear the imprint of the footsteps of God.

Having reached this point, the Association as such has done its job, the job precisely for which the members of Opus Dei have come together. The Association has nothing else to do. It neither can, nor should it, give any further indications. Here begins the free and responsible, personal action of each member. They each do their apostolate on their own initiative, working with complete personal freedom. Autonomously forming their own conscience before the concrete decisions they have to take, they endeavour to seek Christian perfection and to give Christian witness in their own environment, sanctifying their own work, whether

professional, intellectual or manual. Naturally, as they each make decisions autonomously in their secular life, in the temporal realities in which they move, there will often be different options, criteria and ways of acting. We have, in a word, that blessed ‘unorganisation’, that just and necessary pluralism, which is an essential characteristic of good spirit in Opus Dei, and which has always seemed to me the only just and orderly way to conceive the apostolate of the laity.

I will add that this ‘organised unorganisation’ appears even in the corporate works of apostolate which Opus Dei directs as an association, with the desire of contributing to resolve in a Christian way the problems which affect the community of each country. These activities and initiatives of the Association are always of a directly apostolic nature. They are

educational or social welfare activities. But it is precisely our spirit to see that these initiatives should not come from above. And since the circumstances, needs and possibilities of each nation or social group are unique, the central government of the Work leaves to the regional governments practically total autonomy. It is their responsibility to decide, foster and organise the concrete apostolic activities which they consider most appropriate, a university centre, a residence for students, a welfare centre or an agricultural college for farm workers. The logical result is that we have a multicoloured and varied mosaic of activities, a mosaic which is 'organisedly unorganised'.

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4. How has Opus Dei developed and changed since it was founded?

From its very beginning, Opus Dei's only aim has been what I have just described: to contribute to there being in the midst of the world men and women of every race and social condition who try to love and serve God and their fellow man in and through their everyday work. Since the foundation of the Work in 1928, my teaching has been that sanctity is not reserved for a privileged few. All the ways of the earth, every state in life, every profession, every honest task can be divine.

This message has numerous implications which the life of the Work has helped me to grasp with ever greater depth and clarity. The Work was born small and has grown up normally, little by little, like a living organism, like everything that develops in history.

But its objectives have not changed. Nor will they change, no matter how

greatly society may be transformed. The message of Opus Dei is that, under all circumstances any honest work can be sanctified.

People of all walks of life belong to Opus Dei: doctors, lawyers, engineers and artists, as well as bricklayers, miners and farm labourers. All professions are represented, from film directors and jet pilots to high-fashion hairdressers. It is perfectly natural for the members to be up to date with modern developments and to understand the world. Together with their fellow citizens, who are their peers, they are part of the contemporary world and make it modern.

In the light of Opus Dei's spirit, it was clearly a great joy for us to see the Council solemnly declare that the Church does not reject the world, with its progress and development, but understands and loves it.

Furthermore, members of the Work are keenly aware of the fact that they are at one and the same time part of the Church and of society, and they assume individually their personal responsibility as Christians and as citizens. This is a characteristic feature of the spirituality of Opus Dei which its members have endeavoured to live since its foundation nearly forty years ago.

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5. How do you see Opus Dei in the future?

Opus Dei is still very young. Thirty-nine years is barely a beginning for an institution. Our aim is to collaborate with all other Christians in the great mission of being witnesses of Christ's Gospel, to recall that it can vivify any human situation. The task that awaits us is immense. It is a sea without shores, for as long as there are men on earth,

no matter how much the techniques of production may change, they will have some type of work that can be offered to God and sanctified. With God's grace, Opus Dei wants to teach them how to make their work an act of service to all men of every condition, race and religion. Serving men in this way, they will serve God.

Conversations, 57

6. Is Opus Dei involved in economics or politics?

Opus Dei has no political or economic orientation in Spain or elsewhere. Undoubtedly its members are led by Christ's teachings always to defend personal freedom and the rights of all men — the right to live and to work, to be cared for in sickness and old age, the right to marry and have a family and give one's children an education in proportion to their individual talents,

and the right to be treated as befits free men and citizens.

The Work, however, does not propose concrete solutions for any economic, political or cultural problems. Each member is absolutely free to think and to act as he or she sees fit in those fields. In all temporal matters they each enjoy the greatest possible freedom. Opus Dei is open to people of every political, social, cultural and economic tendency that a Christian conscience can accept.

I never talk about politics. My mission as a priest is exclusively spiritual. Furthermore, even if I did express an opinion on a temporal question, the members of the Work would be under no obligation to follow it.

Opus Dei's directors can never impose a political or professional criterion on other members. If a member of the Work ever tried to do

this, or to use other members of the Work for some human end, that person would be expelled straightaway, because the others would rise in legitimate rebellion.

I have never asked anyone who belongs to the Work what party he or she supports, or what political ideas he or she holds; and I will never do so. It would seem to me a violation of their legitimate freedom. And the directors of Opus Dei, the world over, follow the same rule of conduct.

Nevertheless I am aware that among the members of the Work, in Spain just as in any other country, all shades of opinion are represented and I have no objection whatsoever. I respect them all, as I will always respect any temporal decision made by anyone who tries to act according to the dictates of their conscience.

This pluralism is not a problem for the Work. Rather it is a sign of good

spirit that bears witness to the legitimate freedom of each individual.

Conversations, 48

7. Some of Opus Dei's members have important positions in business, politics, private enterprise, etc. To what extent is Opus Dei itself involved in these people's activities or positions?

Opus Dei has nothing whatever to do with politics. It is absolutely foreign to any political, economic, ideological or cultural tendency or group. Let me repeat that its aims are exclusively spiritual and apostolic.

The only thing it demands of its members is that they lead a Christian life, trying to live up to the ideal of the Gospel. Therefore it never becomes involved in any temporal affairs. If someone does not understand this, it may well be

because they do not understand personal freedom, or because they are incapable of distinguishing between the purely spiritual ends for which the members of the Work are associated and the vast field of human activities (economics, politics, culture, art, philosophy etc.) in which they enjoy complete freedom and act on their own responsibility.

From the moment in which they first approach the Work, all its members are fully aware of their individual freedom. If one of them ever tried to exert pressure on the others to make them accept his political opinions, or to use them for human interests, they would rebel and expel him or her without a second thought.

Respect for its members' freedom is an essential condition of Opus Dei's very existence. Without it, no one would come to the Work. Even more. The Work has never intervened in

politics and, with God's help it never will; but if it were to, I would be its number one enemy.

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8. Some people talk about Opus Dei's "secrets", and think that it is organized along the lines of a secret society. What is your response?

I detest everything that could sound like self-praise, but since you have brought the subject up I cannot fail to say that in my opinion Opus Dei is one of the best-loved Catholic organisations in the world. Millions of people, and among them many non-Catholics and non-Christians, are good friends of the Work and help us in our apostolic activities.

Opus Dei is a spiritual and apostolic organisation. If one forgets this fundamental fact, or refuses to believe in the good faith of the members of the Work who affirm it,

it is impossible to understand what we do. And this very lack of understanding can lead people to invent complicated stories and secrets which have never existed.

You speak of charges of secrecy. All that is now ancient history. I could explain, point by point, the origin of those calumnious charges. A powerful organisation, which I prefer not to name but which we esteem and have always esteemed, spent its energies over many years falsifying what it did not understand. They insisted on considering us monks or friars and asked, 'Why don't they all think the same way? Why don't they wear a religious habit or at least a badge?' And they reached the completely illogical conclusion that we were some sort of secret society.

Now all that belongs to the past. Any reasonably well informed person

knows that there is nothing secret about Opus Dei. We do not wear a habit or badge because we are ordinary Christians, not religious. We do not all think the same way because we admit the greatest possible pluralism in all temporal matters and in debatable theological questions. A more accurate knowledge of the facts and the disappearance of unfounded fears have put an end to a situation in which false accusations were lamentably frequent.

It is not surprising, however, that every now and then someone tries to stir up old myths. The fact that we strive to work for God, defending the personal freedom of all men and women, means that we will always meet with the opposition of all the sectarian enemies of freedom. And they will be all the more aggressive if they are religious fanatics or people

who cannot stand the idea of religion.

Fortunately, nonetheless, the majority of publications are not content with repeating old falsehoods and they realise that impartiality does not consist of publishing something halfway between reality and what detractors say, but rather in reflecting objective truth. I personally feel the truth can also be 'news', especially when it is a question of giving information about the activities of the thousands of men and women who belong to Opus Dei or who cooperate with it, striving to carry out a task for the benefit of mankind despite their personal errors — I commit them and I am not surprised that others do so.

Exploding a false myth is always worthwhile. To my mind a journalist has a grave moral obligation to look for accurate information and to keep up to date, even though it may imply

changing previous judgements. Is it really so difficult to admit that something is noble, honest and good, without mixing in absurd, old-fashioned and discredited falsehoods?

It is easy to get to know Opus Dei. It works in broad daylight in all countries, with the full juridical recognition of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The names of its directors and of its apostolic undertakings are well-known. Anyone who wants information can obtain it without difficulty, by contacting its directors or going to one of its centres. You yourself can testify that Opus Dei's directors and the personnel in charge of taking care of journalists never fail to offer all the necessary facilities, answering questions and giving out printed information.

Neither I nor any of the members of Opus Dei expect everyone to understand us or to share our spiritual ideals. I respect everyone's freedom and I want each person to follow his own path in life. But obviously we too have an elementary right to be respected. Ever since 1928 my preaching has been that sanctity is not reserved for the privileged few and that all the ways of the earth can be divine. The reason is that the spirituality of Opus Dei is based on the sanctification of ordinary work. The prejudice must be rejected that the ordinary faithful can do no more than limit themselves to helping the clergy in ecclesiastical apostolate. It should be remembered that to attain this supernatural end men need to be and to feel personally free with the freedom that Christ won for us.

To proclaim and to teach people how to practise this doctrine, I have never needed anything secret. The

members of the Work detest secrecy because they are ordinary faithful, the same as anyone else. They do not change their status when they join Opus Dei. It would be repulsive for them to carry a sign on their back that said, 'Let it be known that I am dedicated to the service of God'. That would be neither lay nor secular. But those who associate with members of Opus Dei and are acquainted with them realise that they belong to the Work, for, even if they do not publicise their membership, neither do they hide it.

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9. How do you judge Opus Dei's success or otherwise?

When an undertaking is supernatural, its 'success' or 'failure' in the ordinary sense of the word is relatively unimportant. As Saint Paul said to the Christians at Corinth, what matters in the spiritual life is

not what others think of us, or even our own opinion of ourselves, but God's opinion.

Undoubtedly the Work has spread all over the world. Men and women of close to seventy nationalities now belong to it. To tell the truth, it is something that surprises me. I cannot provide any explanation for it. The only explanation is the will of God, for 'the Spirit breathes where He will' and He makes use of whomever He sees fit to sanctify us. For me it is an occasion for thanksgiving, for humility and for asking God for the grace to serve Him always.

You also asked by what criteria I measure and judge. The answer is very simple: sanctity, fruits of sanctity.

Opus Dei's most important apostolate is the testimony of the life and conversation of each individual

member in his or her daily contacts with friends and fellow workers.

Who can measure the supernatural effectiveness of this quiet and humble apostolate? It is impossible to evaluate the help we receive from a loyal and sincere friend or the influence of a good mother over her family.

But perhaps your question refers to the corporate apostolates carried out by Opus Dei, supposing that their results can be measured from a human or technical viewpoint: whether a technical training centre for workers contributes to the social advancement of its pupils, whether a university offers its students adequate cultural and professional formation. If that was your intention, I would say that their results can be explained in part by the fact that they are undertakings carried out by carefully trained professionals who are practising their own profession.

This implies, among other things, that these activities are planned in every case in the light of the particular necessities of the society in which they are to be carried out, and adapted to real needs, not according to preconceived schemes.

But let me repeat that Opus Dei is not primarily interested in human effectiveness. The real success or failure of our activities depends on whether, in addition to being humanly well-run, they help those who carry them out and those who make use of their services to love God, to feel their brotherhood with their fellow men, and to manifest these sentiments in a disinterested service of humanity.

Conversations, 31

10. Did the atmosphere in Spain from the 1940s to the 1970s contribute to Opus Dei's growth?

In very few places have we had fewer facilities than in Spain. I don't like to say so, because I naturally love my country deeply, but it is in Spain that we have had the greatest difficulties in making the Work take root. No sooner had it been born, than it met with the opposition of all the enemies of personal freedom and of people who were so attached to traditional ideas that they could not understand the life of the members of Opus Dei, ordinary Christians who strive to live their Christian vocation fully without leaving the world.

The situation in Spain with respect to our corporate apostolates has not been particularly favourable either. The governments of countries where Catholics are a minority have helped the educational and welfare activities founded by the members of Opus Dei far more generously than the Spanish government. The aid that those governments grant the

corporate activities of Opus Dei, like that they usually give other similar centres, is not a privilege, but a just recognition of their social function and of the money they save the taxpayers.

In the course of its international expansion, the spirit of Opus Dei has been very well received in all countries. Our difficulties have in large part been the result of falsehoods originating in Spain. They were invented by members of certain well-defined sectors of Spanish society; in the first place, by the international organisation I mentioned before, but fortunately that seems to belong to the past and I do not hold a grudge against anyone. Another sector is composed of people characterised by partisanship, when not by narrow-mindedness or a totalitarian mentality, who do not understand pluralism and who use their reputation as Catholics for

political purposes. I don't know why, but some of them seem to take special pleasure in attacking Opus Dei, perhaps for false human reasons. Since they can finance them amply with the Spanish taxpayers' money, their attacks are reproduced in certain sectors of the press.

I am perfectly aware that you would like me to name concrete persons and institutions, but I hope you will understand why I do not do so.

Neither my mission nor Opus Dei's is political; my business is to pray. I don't want to say anything that could possibly be interpreted as an intervention in politics. In fact I would prefer not to have even mentioned the subject. I have held my peace for almost forty years, and if I say anything now it is only because I have an obligation to denounce as absolutely false the distorted picture that has been given of our exclusively spiritual work.

And for that very reason, although I have kept silent until now, I intend to speak out in the future, even more clearly if necessary.

Getting back to the main subject of your question, if many people of all social classes, in Spain and throughout the world, have decided to follow Christ with the Work's help, living its spirit, the explanation is not to be found in the environment nor in other external factors. Proof of it lies in the fact that the very people who so lightly affirm the contrary have seen their own groups shrink and the external factors are the same for everyone. Perhaps a partial explanation, from the human point of view, is that they form closed groups, while we do not deprive anyone of his personal freedom.

If in Spain (as in several other countries) Opus Dei is quite well developed, it may well be because

our spiritual work began there forty years ago, and, as I mentioned before, the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War made it necessary to postpone our extension to other countries. Nevertheless I want to add that for a number of years we Spaniards have been a minority in the Work.

I would not like you to think that I do not love my country or that I am not extremely pleased with the activity the Work carries on there. But it is a shame that falsehoods are occasionally disseminated about Opus Dei in Spain.

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