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Sanctity in the world

On the occasion of the feast day of St Josemaria Escriva last June 26, veteran columnist Mercedes Suleik wrote this overview on the Prelature of Opus Dei and Christian spirituality in the middle of the world.

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Most of us have understood sanctity as being a withdrawal from the material, of immersing oneself in prayer, fasting, and penance such as the priests, nuns, and other mystics do. The rest of us are “second class”

Christians who live and work in the world and routinely observe the Ten Commandments to ensure one does not go to hell.

Last June 26 was the feast of St. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer who I was inspired to proclaim that all Christians are capable of being saints while living in the midst of the material world. Referring to the Scriptures where it calls for a universal call for holiness, “be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect,” St. Josemaria stated that everyone should aspire to be a saint. He founded Opus Dei (meaning God’s Work) on October 2, 1928.

Opus Dei, it is a Catholic institution whose mission is to help ordinary Christians, who are neither priests or monks or nuns to understand that their life is a way of holiness, and to find God in ordinary life. Opus Dei focuses on the lives of ordinary

Catholics emphasizes the “universal call for holiness”. Everyone should aspire to be a saint which is within the reach of everyone. It unites spiritual life with professional life, social life and family life and everyone is encouraged to work as excellently as they should as a service to society, a fitting offering to God.

Work is a path to holiness. St. Josemaria had said, “sanctify your work, sanctify yourself in your work, sanctify others in your work.” God created man to work, with Jesus as an example who worked as a carpenter in most of the 30 years of his hidden life.

Spirituality in ordinary people pertains to their normal duties, doing what is expected of us in our work and dealings with others, respecting choice and taking personal responsibility, with emphasis on

charity and cheerfulness. We are encouraged to pray at all times and be “contemplatives in the middle of the world.”

The majority of members of Opus Dei are lay people, with a minority as secular priests under the governance of the Prelate. Those who embrace Opus Dei are not known as “members” but are known as “faithful of the Prelature.” A Personal Prelature is an institution in which the jurisdiction of the Prelate is not linked to a geographical territory as a diocese is, but over persons wherever they may be. The Prelate is appointed by the Pope.

Opus Dei was given Catholic Church approval in 1950 by Pope Pius XII. It was in 1947 that it was made an “institute of pontifical right under the direct governance of the Pope. In 1982. Pope John Paul II issued the decree *Ut Sit*, the Apostolic

Constitution of Opus Dei, establishing it as a Personal Prelature, similar to a diocese but not territorial. The Prelate is pastor to all the faithful of the Prelature worldwide. Initially it was open only to men, but in 1930 women began to be admitted, and in 1947, married persons were allowed to join. Likewise, secular clergy were admitted to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross.

Opus Dei has as its mission the sanctification of one's life while remaining in the world at one's place of work and profession. It is to live the Gospel in the world, while immersed in it so as to transform it, and to redeem it with one's personal love for Christ. His idea anticipated the theology of the lay state as propounded in the Second Vatican Council.

Controversies about Opus Dei are mentioned here for factual

information. Criticism of Opus Dei came to the forefront through a novel, the Da Vinci Code, which portrayed it as a sinister Catholic organization.. The novel is misleading, inaccurate, and anti-Catholic, and as a critic commented, it is a “great thriller” but “lousy history”. Most journalists argued that the criticisms are myths and unproven tales. For a well researched objective investigation the book “Opus Dei” by John L. Allen, Jr., is recommended. Allen is the Vatican correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter and a Vatican analyst for CNN and National Public Radio.

On July 16, before the column above was published, the author passed away. Let us pray for her repose.

Mercedes B. Suleik

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