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Common Works and Auxiliary Societies of Opus Dei: What were they, and why did they cease to exist?

From the foundational years, St. Josemaría said that Opus Dei would have personal and collective ways of communicating the Christian faith and the spirit of the Work. This article describes the evolution of its collective apostolate.

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Over the centuries, institutions in the Church have spread their message throughout the world in different ways. St. Josemaría had in mind both the mentality of his time and the key role of the laity in the spirit of Opus Dei when he thought of ways to encourage members of the Work to contribute to Christian-inspired initiatives in civil society. These ways of acting have evolved over time. He also considered several possible models for the financial and legal support of these activities. At first, he found existing models in professional and Christian university academies, such as the Cicuéndez Academy (where he taught law) and the student academies established by St. Pedro Poveda. In those early years, he resolved that these entities should be civil, not ecclesiastical,

both to fit Opus Dei's secular spirit (which highlights the laity and their capacity to carry out Christian-inspired projects in civil society) and because he had witnessed the confiscation of ecclesiastical property in the Second Spanish Republic. This article offers a brief history of these entities in Opus Dei's foundational phase.

Personal and collective efforts

The founder of Opus Dei envisioned the Work as a great catechesis carried out, first and foremost, by lay people in the midst of the world. Since the Work's foundation, he had pondered practical ways of communicating the Christian faith and the spirit of Opus Dei. As early as 1930, he had written that it would be done both personally and collectively.

The most distinctive aspect of the charism of Opus Dei was the

personal element; each member would spread the Christian message through his or her personal relationships, in their profession, family, and the environment around them. At the same time, St. Josemaría Escrivá thought that the institution could also organize activities with a positive impact on society, in which its members, with personal responsibility, could make the spirit of sanctity known in the secular sphere (these could include, for example, university residences, research institutes, and publishing houses). These efforts would be varied because the message of Opus Dei was open to all human endeavors, and not limited to specific fields of apostolates.

In organizing collective undertakings, the directors of Opus Dei could suggest that some of its members organize civil entities in academic, professional, and cultural

life, in fields such as education, healthcare, the press, and entertainment. It was a first attempt to encourage members of the Work to carry out a secular and civil apostolate.

The DYA Academy and Residence (1934-1936) was the first collective initiative of this kind. St. Josemaría wanted the leadership to be in the hands of professional laypeople, not himself. Later, in the 1940s, other student residences and centers for formation were opened.

Corporate works, common works, and auxiliary societies in the 1950s

When Opus Dei received universal institutional approval from the Holy See in 1950 as a secular institute (at that point the Work was active in 9 countries), the founder formalized through institutional documents its specific apostolic methods: both personal and collective apostolate.

He established two categories of collective apostolate: corporate apostolic works and common works.

Corporate works (corporate apostolic works) were and continue to be collective initiatives in the fields of comprehensive formation, education, and social support. These are non-profit projects with a clear evangelizing purpose. They arise as responses to social needs, whether through the direct initiative of Opus Dei or by taking on existing initiatives. In either case, the directors of the Work, together with their organizers, actively seek to promote the evangelizing dimension of the corporate works and offer advice on aspects of their financial viability.

On the other hand, *common works* referred to entrepreneurial initiatives begun by members of Opus Dei related to the dissemination

of Christian values through publications, media, and entertainment. Opus Dei directors played an advisory role in these works while they lasted, offering doctrinal guidance and apostolic direction. Common works were part of what the founder would call the "apostolate of public opinion."

Auxiliary societies were entities established by members of Opus Dei with the cooperation of others to own civil properties, which they rented or leased to other entities for educational, charitable, or cultural activities. As with any business entity, members acquired shares or contributed capital. Auxiliary societies included everything from entities that owned university residences to those supporting activities like cultural magazines or chains of bookstores. Although these were legally commercial companies, the founder called them "auxiliary

societies" because their primary purpose was not commercial but providing material support to apostolic activities.

Opus Dei ensured that the orientation offered in both corporate apostolic works and common works were aligned with Catholic doctrine. In the early years, Opus Dei directors appointed the heads of these initiatives, who assumed legal and financial responsibility and reported to Opus Dei authorities on the progress of these projects.

The first two corporate apostolic works (not including university residences) in the field of education were Gaztelueta School (Bilbao, 1951) and the *Estudio General de Navarra* (Pamplona, 1952), which became the University of Navarre in 1960. In 1954, a sports school called Brafa was launched in Barcelona, focusing on youth education and promoting

Christian character in sports. The next educational initiatives emerged in Culiacán, Mexico in 1955, with the Chapultepec school and institute, both of which developed a complementary trades training section.

Meanwhile, starting in 1952, various common works arose in the field of communications. Ten years later, members of Opus Dei had created similar initiatives in seven countries, including cultural and university magazines, three newspapers, two professional journals, a weekly magazine, a journal of practical theology, a film magazine, and a pop culture magazine. There was also a network of bookstores in Spain, along with some publishing houses, communications agencies, workshops for sacred art, and several cultural forums.

Opus Dei directors were responsible for overseeing the evangelizing dimension of these initiatives and providing advice about the projects' viability. To that end, during that period, the president of Opus Dei ratified the appointment of the director of each common work and appointed a spiritual advisor. However, the governing bodies of Opus Dei did not manage the boards of directors or editorial committees, and they did not have authority over the content of these projects.

Corporate apostolate in the 1960s

During the 1960s, three significant changes transformed the corporate presence of Opus Dei's apostolate in society: the expansion of universities, schools, and technical institutes; the emergence of what were known as *personal works* (also called *personal initiatives*); and the end of the common apostolic works.

The founder encouraged members of Opus Dei to begin corporate works in the form of universities and higher education centers in more countries. He also reminded them that corporate dedication to private education was not the ultimate goal of the Work. However, given society's increasing secularization, it became advisable to make clear the compatibility of the Gospel with intellectual and academic pursuits. These works aimed to offer a model of professional competence and Christian life, open to people of all faiths.

The second university established as a corporate apostolic work began in Piura (Peru) in 1969, with a strong focus on social support from the outset. In other countries, initiatives were launched with the goal of eventually becoming universities, such as the Women's Institute of Higher Studies (Guatemala City,

Guatemala, 1964) and the Center for Research and Communication (Manila, Philippines, 1967). In terms of primary and secondary education, priority was given to opening schools in working-class or industrial neighborhoods in various cities worldwide.

Special emphasis was also placed on technical and professional training, both formal and informal, through schools that incorporated these elements and through initiatives such as trades training centers, agricultural family schools, secretarial schools, hospitality schools, language schools, and home and cultural education centers. The Work saw these educational spaces as appropriate means to help raise people's standard of living and spread the Christian message.

The birth of personal works

In 1963, a group of supernumerary members in Spain sent Opus Dei authorities a proposal to open more educational centers. St. Josemaría responded by explaining that he did not see the feasibility of creating a network of schools as corporate apostolic works, because the service that Opus Dei was committed to providing in such projects would require many members. He saw the risk that education would absorb most of the institution's activity. However, if parents started new schools, Opus Dei could offer chaplains, qualified religion teachers, and spiritual guidance. And as he had already suggested for corporate apostolic works, he added that in these schools (which were called *personal works* from the year 1966) priority should be given to fostering close relationships with families and teachers in order to create a suitable educational environment.

Some members of the Work launched the *Fomento de Centros de Enseñanza* society, followed by other educational associations, so that by the mid-1960s more than thirty schools classified as personal works existed in Spain. Similar initiatives were established in most countries where Opus Dei was present, particularly in Latin America.

The end of common apostolic works (1966)

Over time, the founder realized that the "common works" presented serious difficulties. The very concept of something "common" created an irresolvable tension between the professional independence of the project heads and the role of Opus Dei directors.

On one hand, common works were a mixture of professional initiatives led or managed by members of Opus Dei in a personal capacity; each had

a management team and was financially accountable to the company that supported it. But, on the other hand, Opus Dei authorities maintained a particular oversight to ensure the evangelizing purpose of the projects and their sustainability. This participation was based on trust, without formal written agreements.

Secondly, a cultural difficulty arose related to the free action of Catholics in society. The media created and directed by members of Opus Dei were not confessional, and the owning entities were civil enterprises. Due to the structure of these entities and the mindset of the time, it was difficult to clearly distinguish the personal activities of members of Opus Dei from the institutional actions of its directors. If a member of the Work directed a media outlet, it was assumed that the institution was ultimately

responsible for the editorial line, particularly on controversial or political issues. If Opus Dei directors denied this, they were accused of secrecy or of controlling the media behind the scenes.

Additionally, some members of the Work appealed to regional directors with criticisms or differing viewpoints about media outlets managed by other Opus Dei members.

In summary, after fifteen years of existence, common works made it difficult to understand Opus Dei's message about personal freedom and the legitimate pluralism of Catholics in public life, as well as their professional choices. In view of the evolution of those works in the early years, it was inconsistent for there to be media outlets perceived as institutional expressions in areas where a diversity of opinions was

both legitimate and in fact encouraged by the spirit of Opus Dei. After a period of reflection, in December 1966, the founder announced the end of this type of work. From that point on, collective apostolic initiatives were divided between corporate apostolic works and personal works in the fields of education, healthcare, and formation.

Over the next few years, after they were unlinked from Opus Dei, some of the cultural and communication initiatives that had begun as common works continued as personal entrepreneurial activities, while others closed. The idea of promoting lay participation in Christian-inspired public initiatives remained very much alive, with clear encouragement from Opus Dei authorities, though in different legal and institutional frameworks that evolved over time to better

distinguish areas of responsibility and action. Opus Dei authorities defined their role in these initiatives more clearly as this process evolved: it was one of encouragement, providing formation in social doctrine among the organizers, fostering personal responsibility for investors, etc.

The evolution of these instruments also reflected a deeper understanding by the founder of the demands of secularity and lay apostolate. The need for the free assumption of personal responsibilities was seen more clearly, as the recently concluded Second Vatican Council had taught. He would express this a few years later in a famous homily.[1]

Disappearance of auxiliary societies (1969)

Escrivá understood that the concept of auxiliary societies aligned with the

secular spirit of Opus Dei and encouraged the laity's responsibility in evangelization. As an institution, Opus Dei did not own either civil or ecclesiastical assets, such as properties or inheritances, except in rare cases. These societies, being non-ecclesiastical, did not involve the Church or Opus Dei in financial or professional management.

To ensure that auxiliary societies maintained an apostolic focus, Opus Dei directors appointed a technical advisor whose mission was to ensure that the society fulfilled its purpose (direct or, as it generally was, indirect) of evangelization. This person did not need to hold a governance position within the entity, but was part of the board of directors or management. Additionally, at least 51% of the entity's capital was held by individuals who shared the desire to promote Christian values through

the society's activities, ensuring that its mission remained intact.

During the 1950s, some of these entities experienced significant growth, particularly in Spain. The most notable example of an auxiliary society was ESFINA (*Sociedad Española Anónima de Estudios Financieros*), founded in 1956. This was an investment fund holding a majority of shares in various entities with essentially apostolic objectives. ESFINA owned a majority stake in SARPE (*Sociedad Anónima de Revistas, Periódicos y Ediciones*), an editorial company established five years earlier to participate in media-related entities. The ESFINA group also held shares in other companies' boards, including DELSA, a book distributor, and Dipena and Filmayer, which were film distributors.

At the extraordinary general congress of Opus Dei in September 1969, participants noted that many people believed the institution was managing business enterprises. It was difficult to explain that the assets and projects belonged to the individuals or entities that were promoting them. After considering this issue, the founder decided to suppress auxiliary societies, making it clear that the material tools used for apostolic activities belonged to their respective owners, and that Opus Dei did not manage those societies.

The efforts to create and consolidate a support structure for certain evangelization initiatives (some successful, others not) led to the conclusion that the measure of success for these works was not merely their financial or evangelizing effectiveness but also how clearly they expressed Opus

Dei's secular spirit. Over the years, as more experience was gained, the founder had been trying to clarify the specific manifestations of this secularity, In fact, when the common works disappeared, some of them were financially sustainable.

These successive changes during the founder's lifetime helped shape Opus Dei's collective apostolate. Considering the variety of initiatives and the diversity of national cultures and legislation, it sometimes took years to overcome the natural inertia and clarify the relationship between the current Prelature of Opus Dei and the educational and charitable entities. These entities, through bilateral agreements, receive spiritual guidance and pastoral care from Opus Dei in accordance with nos. 121 to 123 of its current statutes.

For a more detailed account of this evolution, please see *Opus Dei: A History* volume 1, pgs. 209-232 and volume 2, pgs. 338-363 (José Luis González Gullón and John F. Coverdale, Scepter, New York, 2022).

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[1] You must foster everywhere a genuine 'lay outlook', which will lead to three conclusions: be sufficiently honest, so as to shoulder one's own personal responsibility; be sufficiently Christian, so as to respect those brothers in the Faith who, in matters of free discussion, propose solutions which differ from those which each one of us maintains; and be sufficiently Catholic so as not to use our Mother the Church, involving her in human factions. (…) Interpret, then, my words as what they are: a call to exercise your rights every day, and not merely in time of emergency.

A call to fulfil honourably your commitments as citizens, in all fields — in politics and in financial affairs, in university life and in your job — accepting with courage all the consequences of your free decisions and the personal independence which corresponds to each one of you" (*Conversations*, "Passionately Loving the World," no. 117).