

Everything has meaning and purpose

Interview with Ashley Stratford, who works as a Town Planning Consultant in Manchester

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I am 39 years of age, am married with five children and currently live in Altrincham close to Manchester. I am a Town Planning Consultant and enjoy films, most sports, especially Formula 1 motor racing and football,

socialising and of course Italian automobiles (I am a member of the Alfa Romeo owners club).

Meeting Opus Dei

I was born a Catholic, but it was not until my late teens that I started asking the usual teenage questions of who am I? and where am I going? and how can I change this world?! I first met Opus Dei (the Work) when I was 20. A good friend of mine, a brother at the Oratorian Church in Birmingham, gave me a copy of 'The Way' by Saint Josemaria Escriva, and suggested I read some of its meditations every day - it was (and is) a great boost to my prayer life. The brother was a great help to me during my college years in Birmingham and was like an older brother and helped me develop my spiritual life and love of God. One evening several members of the Work including Father Nick Morrish,

the current Regional Vicar and a couple of others came up to Birmingham to give a talk and answer questions about the lay vocation - something quite new and enlightening for me: in order to give your life to serving God, one did not have to join a religious community or the priesthood. I had thought briefly of the priesthood, but knew that I would really like to get married and have a family. The spirit of Opus Dei seemed ideal for a person like me who was searching for a way to serve God in a very ordinary and practical way.

My First Impressions

I was immediately impressed by people involved and associated with the Work and became friends with a recently married man from Paraguay also studying in Birmingham. He seemed so calm and fulfilled with regard to his faith and how to live it.

He was a supernumerary. The first numerary member I met was again a very ordinary bloke, who understood the ways of the world, but who was also clear about how to live his faith and how to serve God in the middle of the world. This simple yet obvious way of serving God whilst working in the world was a revelation to me.

I then started going to days of recollection at the centres of the Work in Oxford then later in Manchester, and was encouraged bit by bit to create a 'plan of life' - actions throughout the day to build my relationship with God and consequently to help the people around me to search and get to know the family of God. When I left college, I started working in Stoke-on-Trent and that time living alone with daily Mass available for me around the corner, helped me live my plan of life and get closer to God. I also started to get involved in a number of activities

of the Work and received spiritual direction on a regular basis by a lay person like myself who understood my situation. I went on a work camp with Opus Dei to Poland where we helped lay the foundations for new school - one of the best holidays of my life.

My Vocation

By 1990 I had been in touch with the Work for nearly four years and I was invited to a world Youth Day with Pope John Paul II in his home country of Poland, at a time when communism was crumbling away. I still remember that trip with great affection. The Pope was a star and meeting many friendly and devout young people from eastern Europe was an inspiration. I still remember the Pope calling upon the Holy Spirit to come to the youth gathered there and telling us "You young people make so much noise - keep it up!! "

That day at the Marian shrine at Jasna Gora changed my life - I thought I must now commit myself to serving God.

Six months later on 1 January 1991 I asked to join Opus Dei.

My Family

I have been married for nearly 11 years and my wife and I have been blessed with 5 children (so far!?). My family and my relationship with God are my top priorities. Like most people with a young family, it is a challenge to get the work life balance correct, but who on their deathbed wished they'd spent more time at work ? It's tough bringing up children these days (I suppose it always was), but with God's help it is really a joy. With my wife we are bringing them up as Catholics with respect for people of all faiths and backgrounds and I would hope God

calls them to have a vocation too, but that is between them and God.

My Work

Whilst like everyone, I have ups and downs at work, frustrations and disappointments, it all has meaning and purpose - I can give it to God. I realise that God does not want perfectionists, but love from his children and this love is shown by doing the best we can. I'm not saying that since that time I have never complained about things, but the key is to struggle to be better and to do it with God - with Him you can't lose, He will look after you!

This 'supernatural' dimension to work, helps me keep things in perspective, even when there's deadline after deadline and things don't appear to be satisfactory. But I am a firm believer in working hard and playing hard and thus I try to enjoy work and try help others to

enjoy their work too (you'll have to ask them if I succeed).

Opus Dei in the world (but especially Britain)

The world needs God, people need God. The Christian faith teaches us that we can have a close personal relationship with God in all of the three persons: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Knowing I am a son of God is a liberation to me. He is always there and we can always call on Him and talk though our issues with Him. Opus Dei is still quite small in Britain compared to some other countries, but in every walk of our society there is a need for good men and women to stand up and make a change. For most of us this will be in apparently insignificant actions, but these all add up and if given to God can be magnified a 100 times in importance. I believe Opus Dei is one way to make such a

difference. Giving oneself to God in the ordinary duties of every day is never insignificant and with abandonment to Him things will change. We must remember that Opus Dei is His work and once our lives are given to Him, He will do the rest.

Finally - Food for thought

All members of the work have the deepest admiration and affection for the Founder of Opus Dei - Saint Josemaria Escriva. He is a blessing for the Christian Church and the world as a whole. Though I never had the pleasure of meeting him, upon reading his life, I can clearly see that he was a man of immense humility, self sacrifice and self giving. In fact he did say that he had never wanted to be the founder of any organisation, such as Opus Dei, but if God wanted it, he wanted it. We need to ask ourselves do I want

to change things in the world, even in my little corner of it? St Josemaria recommended abandonment to your Heavenly Father and with that you will receive peace and more than you ever could have imagined. "Dream and your dreams will fall short" (Josemaria Escriva).

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