

What Opus Dei Can Contribute to Present-Day Church and Society

A talk given by Professor Alan McClelland, former Director of Institute of Education and Professor of Educational Studies at Hull University, at a conference in commemoration of the first feast day of St Josemaría Escrivá.

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The topic I have been invited to address has at least two problematical aspects. The first is its sheer breadth and scope, the second is the presumption involved in attempting to define, *'from without'* as it were, the role of the members of the Work in their contribution to the spiritual regeneration of modern society. The topic has bearings not only on the nature of missionary enterprise itself, but also upon that interior life, the generative source in any proclamation of Jesus and his teaching.

One of the fondest and enduring memories of my early schooldays is that of being taught the *'Morning Offering'*, a dedication that associates all the activities of the day, *'prayers, works, joys and sufferings'*, with the fulfilment of the Divine Plan in and for the world of which we are a part. It remains today a comforting dedication, not only because it

sanctifies the human condition in all that is experienced, but also because it enables the placing of things in proportion as we encounter people, events, ideas and responses in daily life. It does not say anything *specifically* about ‘community’ or ‘society’ but the enduring faith and love that it presupposes is the yeast intended to leaven the whole. Now the spirituality of Opus Dei is essentially concerned with that same process of leavening and, hence, with the importance of the inter-relationship of the interior life, the world of labour, and the apostolate, a trinity of interlocking and liberating forces that extends from personal commitment, to the spiritual welfare of neighbours and companions and to the significance of the secular occupations in which people are engaged. This is an extroverted approach that eschews the unduly introspective *ambience* that sometimes dominated the thrust of a

number of earlier forms of historic Catholic Action. It is an approach that broadens the spiritual and intellectual life from preoccupation with self and concerns of self-defence. The unity or wholeness formed by interior life, labour and apostolate is the approach St. Josemaría emphasised repeatedly in his teaching.

In its simplest terms, making Jesus known in the home, in the school, in the workplace, is the heart of evangelisation. Once he is known, he cannot but be loved; once he is loved, his teaching assumes an imploding imperative in daily living.

Catholicism places great emphasis upon the communal aspect of human life: the whole of the *religious life* is based upon it for instance, and our Christian identity is recognized in the way we give witness to it in relating to each other. In ***Conversations***, (section 29, 1967), St. Josemaría talks

about meeting all people ‘*whether Catholic or not, with love*’, and working together ‘*with all men and women in solving the many questions that trouble the world*’. Indeed, ‘*Passionately Loving the World*’ is the title given to a homily he delivered at the University of Navarre, which encapsulates his concern. Pope John Paul II has endorsed this missionary direction, speaking of living in the world ‘*while living immersed in the world*’ but doing so ‘*in order to transform it and to redeem it with one’s personal love of Christ*’.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, in his interview with Peter Seewald, printed as ***Salt of the Earth***, muses that today ‘*maybe we are facing a new and different kind of epoch in the Church’s history, where Christianity will again be characterized more by the mustard seed, where it will exist in small, seemingly insignificant groups but nonetheless live an intensive*

struggle against evil and bring the good into the world...’ Such a prediction, of course, may be considered as too pessimistic but, nevertheless, it is a possible scenario in the way our predominantly secular society seems to be advancing. The teachings of St. Josemaría and the commitment brought to bear by the Work have enhanced roles to play in that process of struggle with the desensitizing forces in society with which Ratzinger is concerned. The lay apostolate is vast and difficult in human terms and the initiative cannot be left to that of the clergy or religious who are decreasing in numbers and, necessarily, becoming less evident in the wider work-context. It is perforce the task of Christian laymen and women, mature in their faith and properly prepared for the undertaking by sound spiritual and human formation, to articulate their faith to

others. Such a role and commitment is not a task, of course, only for members of Opus Dei: it is the apostolic call to all Christ's followers, a necessary and required outpouring of the gift of faith that lies within them.

Dr. John Polkinghorne, in his *Ideos Lectures*, makes the point that '*because the infinite God must veil his presence from finite beings, the divine light will always be refracted by the cultural prisms of humankind*'. It is here that example is at a premium, reminding us of Donald Nicholl's anecdote that the Russian thinker, Fyodorov, felt '*you can tell the condition of a man's soul by the way that he makes the sign of the cross*'. While we are each responsible for our own lives and commitment, one of the fundamental tasks faced in the workplace is that of showing the importance of *reflection* in all that is done and how it is done. In secular

terms, indeed, reflection, rather than acting on impulse or instinct, leads to good work-practice: how much more important is the acquisition of that skill in things of the spirit, in morality, in matters of faith.

Reflection, of course, necessitates a standard for measurement and it is here that everybody needs, in human terms, a '*soul-friend*' to whom one can turn, for comfort in times of distress, for support in times of difficulty, for advice in times of perplexity. When Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of heaven, he sometimes did so by comparing it to a communal meal. It is important, therefore, to strive for the sort of interaction in the workplace that encourages sharing. Quoting St. Anselm that '*faith seeks understanding*', Fr. Vincent Twomey in his new study of the Catholic Church in Ireland argues that a living faith is not simply a receiving faith

but a questioning faith ‘*searching to comprehend the incomprehensible God, our goal in life, and His love towards the world revealed in Jesus Christ*’. He defines Christian faith in terms used by St. Augustine and Pope John Paul II that ‘*to believe is nothing other than to think with assent*’. To be effective as Christians in the workplace, therefore, we need to know the faith thoroughly and to have been formed by it.

A recent research project concentrating upon Irish teenage boys and girls, has been examining some of the manifestations of the transition from Catholic school to the worlds of higher education and the workplace. One of the findings indicates that even after being launched into adult life, the influence of parents and of the family home lingers and often continues to be a decisive living influence in the matters of Faith and Church. While

school had constituted an important influence of its own, especially in finding meaning through relationships and community, in the long term it is effective mainly when in tune with values predominant in the home. The school, in other words, is not a long-term substitute or permanent compensation for shortcomings in the family. Another aspect of particular interest in this ongoing project is that peer group culture is showing itself to be of less influence than family background factors with the passing of time. Furthermore, the role of the parish in offsetting the widespread subjectivism of religious attitudes is shown to be decidedly weak, particularly so perhaps as parishes have often abandoned their commitment to the re-establishment of social groupings, such as societies, confraternities and clubs. As ecclesiastical social supports have been thus weakened, young people

have found themselves in an adult society where all seems to be under threat, including the family itself and the idea of permanency in human relationships and commitment. They are thus thrown back upon personal memories that are sometimes too weak to sustain them as they mature and encounter specific problems of a spiritual, moral or human nature.

In dealing with this point, Vincent Twomey sees the recovery of *virtue* in modern society as '*the sole means of eliminating some of the worst features of personal alienation that is at the root of the aimlessness that finds temporary resolution in drugs, drink and sex*'. But that virtue, he argues, '*only makes sense if there is a transcendent goal in life, if God is our ultimate goal*'. The search for meaning and the search for happiness become a single search because the latter '*seeks what lies above, beyond and outside oneself*'.

One of the shibboleths current in contemporary society is that of *self-fulfilment*, a term which has supplanted references to *self-sacrifice* or *self-abnegation*, as desirable approaches to moral challenges. It manifests itself in reference to career development, to physical appearance, in regard to sexual attraction, to financial gain, to possessions, to wealth accumulation, and other forms of self-interest.

Reflection shows that self-fulfilment cannot be achieved by becoming an addict of materialism. There is no lasting final goal of achievement in such seeking and no enduring state, no final peace or contentment.

Although the desirability of material self-fulfilment is the message portrayed daily in the media, in literature, in political engagement and in the prominent publicity of particular life-styles, there are signs in society of a deeper thought and a deeper searching in young people. In

their involvement in good causes — for the homeless, the ill, the disadvantaged, in their commitment to the welfare of third world countries and their concern over third world debt and in their support for international peace, there is manifestation that reflection upon self-fulfilment has pointed to outcomes other than the material.

The growth of base communities, for instance, and the new movements within the Church, the developing popularity of forms of contemplative prayer (not always in the Christian tradition), the existence of charismatic groups, a growing response to environmental issues, are all pointers to the searching for a more reflective form of self-fulfilment. As the late Msgr. Gilbey put it, it goes right back to the *'uniqueness and individuality of every human being and our continuing as the persons we are for all eternity'*. At the heart of this reflection rests the

idea of responsibility for others, a sense of caring and commitment and a developing view of tradition and heritage.

The Second Vatican Council in its attempts to challenge modernity with Jesus Christ, pointed the way: self-fulfilment would be illusory without embracing the truth and the message of Jesus Christ. That fundamental step in turning to Jesus is a major apostolic task for all in Church and Society. It is an especial apostolate for the followers of St. Josemaría. It embraces the countering of forms of alienation, ignorance, and apathy and the treating of the cancer of indifference towards religion and the moral order. In that Pentecostal process the Work must continue to respond to people, where they are spiritually, by its quality of sympathy and understanding and by using a language, style and action that clearly relate to human need.

In simple phraseology, the new evangelisation needs to be counter-cultural: by this is meant there has to be a process of recognizing and identifying the basic assumptions of contemporary attitudes and a determination to resist the secularizing values of the circumambient culture. In this way is created what Cardinal Kaspar has recently described as a readiness for faith, because, he maintains, there exists a fundamental loss in our society of the very ability to believe.

That is another task for the Work: help in the restoration of the ability to believe! St. Josemaría in ***Christ is Passing By*** teaches his readers that anyone who wants to fight has to use the available means and these are primarily based firmly upon prayer, the sacraments and a right-ordered interior life. Pope John Paul II has reinforced this when speaking of the need for a *new evangelization*, one

that is '*new in its ardour, methods and expression*', one that is new in language and style, one that approaches people from where they are as distinct from where they ought to be.

There is a task for the Catholic school, too; it needs to be more consciously counter-cultural, educating pupils to question underlying assumptions in moral attitudes and social pressures, teaching *discernment* in identifying the hidden agenda in contemporary society. The school has to undertake more consciously, in other words, the new task of preparation in readiness for faith. The preliminary step in the process of evangelisation is all the more effective because of St. Josemaría's perceptive vision that for the majority of Christians their route to salvation is in the world and in the way they fashion that world from within and relate to it. Karl Rahner

in *Theological Investigations* put it in another way: ‘every apostolate is an uncovering of that Christianity which God in his grace has already hidden in the hearts of those who think they are not Christians’. This is not surprising because, as Aidan Nichols expresses it, ‘without a pervasive perception of a transcendental truth, goodness and beauty conferring coherence and abiding value on human life and action, no high culture can be lastingly sustained’.

The main contribution that Opus Dei can make to the present-day Church and Society is to play its role to the full in helping to release the hidden energy at the heart of man, that seeking for God within man’s personal experience that is encountered in the day-to-day relationships with others, in families, in schooling, in labour. That Divine infusion is often recognized in a personal conversation, in an

awareness of experience in art, literature, film or music, in a reaction to a political, social or world event or natural disaster, in the seeking of consolation at times of personal suffering, bereavement or loss, in a religious experience that might occur. Fundamentally, there lies at the root of the approach that the Christian view of life is not an alternative view of the world, one among many, but a view that is greater than the world view, embracing the whole of life and existence in its cosmic awareness and significance.

To bring such an awareness to relationships with others, requires courage of an uncommon degree. The knowledge that there is an intimate connexion between moral principles, social justice and the spiritual dimensions of the human person, helps to reappropriate the concept of personhood and identity.

In that process, a reconnection to the teachings of the Church also becomes possible. Cardinal Ratzinger has summed this up by saying:

'somewhere deep down man knows: I have to be challenged and I have to learn to form myself according to a higher standard and to give myself and to lose myself.' A refusal to be held to a higher standard, he says 'is ultimately the refusal of love itself and that ruins man'.

1. ***Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá***, Dublin, 1974.

2. William O'Connor: ***Opus Dei: An Open Book***, Dublin, 1991, p.26, quoting ***L'Osservatore Romano***, 27, August 1979.

3. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: ***Salt of the Earth: The Church at the End of the Millennium***, An interview with Peter Seewald, San Francisco ed., 1996, p.16.

4. John Polkinghorne: ***Science and Christianity, 2: Taking Theology Seriously***, Farmington Papers, Oxford, 1994, pp.6-8.
5. Donald Nicholl: ***Holiness***, London. 1981, pp.121-122.
6. *Ibidem*, p. 12; James Hitchcock: ***Recovery of the Sacred***, San Francisco, 1974, pp.89-90, 107.
7. D. Vincent Twomey: ***The End of Irish Catholicism?***, Dublin 2003, p. 34.
8. *Ibidem*, pp.40-41.
9. *Ibidem*, p.75
10. Basil Hume: ***To Be A Pilgrim***, London, 1984, pp.49-50.
11. Msgr. Gilbey: ***We Believe***, London, 1982, p.95.
12. Josemaría Escrivá: ***Christ is Passing By***, translated and

reprinted, Manila, 1974, pp.170 *seq.*

See also Peter Berglar: *Opus Dei.*

Life and Work of Its Founder

Josemaría Escrivá, English edition, Princeton, 1994, esp. chapter six, pp. 153 *seq.*

13. Karl Rahner: *Theological Investigations*, New York, 1961-92, vol.12, p.213.

14. Aidan Nichols: *Come to the Father*, London. 2000, p.12.

15. V. Alan McClelland: *Christian Education in a Pluralist Society*, London & New York, 1988, pp. 20-32.

16. Ratzinger, *op.cit*, p.168.

17. *Ibidem.*

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