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VIDEO: Q & A about Opus Dei

Fr. Michael Barrett, a priest of Opus Dei, responds to some of the most common questions about Opus Dei. A transcription of this video interview can be found at the bottom of this page.

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TRANSCRIPTION: Questions & Answers about Opus Dei with Fr. Michael Barrett

1. What is Opus Dei?

Fr. Barrett:

Opus Dei is a Catholic organization for lay people. It is worldwide and it was founded in 1928 by St. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer who was a Diocesan priest in Madrid, Spain, at the time that he founded Opus Dei. Its purpose is to teach people how to seek holiness in their ordinary, every day activities of life, whatever they do, their professional work, their family life, their social activities. The words Opus Dei are Latin and they mean Work of God. Sometimes you'll hear people talk about "the Work" which is just shorthand for Work of God, and the idea of holiness is to be more united to God but not by doing anything particularly different from the other people around you, but finding God right in the place right where you are. And doing that is possible with some help, with some

coaching, some training, and Opus Dei tries to provide that for people so that they can grow in holiness. They can develop a spiritual life, they can become prayerful, even in the midst of riding their elevators and answering telephones, and getting on and off buses and transportation, and in between phone calls at the office that they become people who really learn how to pray throughout the day. The current membership worldwide is 86,000 people, men and women of all walks of life, all ethnic backgrounds, it's just an amazing display of the power of the Holy Spirit within the church.

In the United States there are 3,000 members and in all cases most of these people are married, living in their own homes, carrying out their own lives, and doing the things that everybody else does that are, that pass unnoticed but they are living the spirit of Opus Dei. Besides this

group of people which is rather small in context of the overall church, there are thousands and thousands of people that have benefited by Opus Dei's spirituality, its activities, and those people are hard to keep track of there are so many. The place where I saw it most clearly was at the canonization of St. Josemaria in 2002 where there were 350, 400,000 people in attendance at St. Peter's Square, and perhaps ten percent of those people were members of Opus Dei, at the most, and the rest were people who had been touched by St. Josemaria Escriva's teachings, by the activities of the people who were the sons and daughters of St. Josemaria as members of Opus Dei, and had come to Rome to participate in this great moment of his canonization. Out of the 86,000 members around the world about half are men and about half are women, and that's the way it's been for most of the recent years. The women in Opus Dei are

doctors, lawyers, professional people, homemakers, there are people who are working in hospitality in our centers of Opus Dei, there's a great deal of work to be done in the area of hospitality and that's their professional field, a number of women doing that. The women in Opus Dei are just like any other women in the world. The only difference you could say is, again, this idea of a consciousness that whatever they do they're trying to do for the glory of God, they're trying to bring God into everything and to bring people closer to God through the things that they're doing which is a very important part of, even of their womanhood. The women are governed the same way as the men which is to say that they govern their organization, their activities just like the men do. In both cases, the men and the women govern with the vicars of Opus Dei. That is to say, the priests who stand in the place of the

prelate who really governs Opus Dei worldwide from Rome.

2. How is Opus Dei related to the Catholic Church?

Fr. Barrett:

Opus Dei is part of the Catholic Church. The members of Dei are all ordinary Catholics, just like everyone else in the Catholic Church, and our teachings are what the Catholic Church teaches, no more, no less. We don't have anything special to add or to differ from what the church has taught traditionally for these two thousand years.

It's a specifically designated organization that serves the universal church, so everywhere in the world, though the people remain in their own parishes and their own place. The organization is called a personal prelature. It's a canonical, a legal distinction that is made in the

church... It's universal in scope and it allows people, wherever they are, to be able to be associated with this organization and receive the support and the benefits of the organization right where they are in their own parish, their own diocese, their own place of work.

...the prelate is a man named Bishop Javier Echevarría. He was designated prelate by Pope John Paul II in 1994, he's originally from Spain, he was a very close associate of the founder of Opus Dei as well as the successor of the founder of Opus Dei. So he's the third man who is the head of Opus Dei in the history of the organization. He lives in Rome which is where the headquarters of Opus Dei are, and as Bishop his basic responsibility is to take care of his flock, the members of Opus Dei and to report to the Holy Father like all the other Bishops in the Catholic Church report to the

Holy Father about what they're doing in their own, in their own place.

Opus Dei, like many, many things in the Catholic Church started out small, it was something that St. Josemaria Escriva saw in a prayer that he was experiencing in 1928... The organization at that point was something that was just local. It was in the Diocese of Madrid and not beyond that but he recognized that God wanted Opus Dei to reach all the corners of the earth, and he had to find a way to make that happen. The Archbishop of Madrid in those years was a good friend of his, and understood that this was something supernatural, this was something from God, and so he helped him. In 1947 Opus Dei received the approval of the Vatican to be an organization that could go beyond just the diocese and the country of Spain, but throughout the world. At that time it still wasn't clear how Opus Dei would

fit into the Church because it was so new, it was so radical, the idea of lay people being right where they are, becoming saints and contemplatives was something that was just not foreseen in anybody's ideas. So he had to work his way toward finding a place that Opus Dei would fit in the structure of the Catholic Church, like a diocese fits in the structure of the Catholic Church, or the religious communities fit in the Catholic Church, he had to find a place for Opus Dei to fit in the Catholic Church. It took a number of years. Finally in 1982, which in fact was seven years after his death, Opus Dei was approved as a personal prelature by Pope John Paul II after he polled thousands of Bishops around the world where Opus Dei held activities up until that time in those dioceses. So in 1982 it became clearly a part of the hierarchical structure of the church.

And members of Opus Dei are still members of their own parishes?

Fr. Barrett:

They continue to be members of their own parishes, their own dioceses and they receive all the benefits and the support that every Catholic receives from his or her parish, but they receive the additional benefit of being guided in how to develop a spiritual life that's stronger and deeper, as well as how to understand their faith better and put it into practice through the activities of Opus Del. It's supplementary. It's like many organizations in the Catholic Church that are available for people that want to know more about something that's Catholic, they go out and they join an organization that has to do with that so that they can pursue that. Well, we're one more part of the Catholic Church in that regard.

Another organization that helps people get to where they want to be in their spiritual life and in their outreach, their evangelization.

3. How did St. Josemaria name Opus Dei?

Fr. Barrett:

He recounts how he got the name, is that he was one day talking with his confessor, who was a man that he always spoke to about these things that were going on in his soul to make sure that they really were from God and not just his own imaginings. And one day when he was talking to the confessor, a priest, the man asked him, he said how's that work of God coming along that you're doing? And, you know, because it's the work of God in a very general sense, and he thought, gee, that's what it is because up until then he almost did not even want to put a name on it because it was something that was so grass

roots and so much a part of the Catholic faith that it was, to name it, was almost to separate it from what it meant to be in the universal sense. But when the man said, now is that work of God going? He thought, I like that. Opus Dei, operatio Dei, the two ways of talking about work of God in Latin, and then he settled on Opus Dei, the Work of God.

His definition, the one that strikes me the most is he used to say, it's a grand catechesis. Catechesis is a word in the Catholic Church that means teaching; teaching the faith, teaching the meaning of the faith, and he used to see Opus Dei as a grand catechesis, that the members of Opus Dei would go out, and by their lives and by their words, teach the faith to the people around them without doing anything strange or special but just being who they are in the middle of the world. So it's a grand catechesis. He used to talk about it as being a mobilization

of Christians moving into all of the corners of society.

4. What are the different ways of being a member of Opus Dei?

Fr. Barrett:

The basic distinction of the members of Opus Dei is their availability, and that is some are celibate, and so they are fully available for the activities of Opus Dei, and most are married, so their first responsibility is to their own family and their own, their own lives. The members who remain celibate are called numeraries...

Associates are celibate members of Opus Dei, who unlike numeraries usually live outside of a center of Opus Dei. They are also as completely available as they can be to the activities to opus Dei though they may have obligations toward family that doesn't allow them to be

entirely available as a numeraries but they are celibate members.

The supernumeraries, actually in Opus Dei, epitomize what the spirit of Opus Dei is all about because they're out there in the middle of the world doing everything like every other Catholic is doing. The celibate members are completely in the middle of the world, yet they have made themselves more available to help the organization, to support the supernumeraries in their prayer life, in learning about the faith, learning the spirit of Opus Dei, learning about their Catholic faith. So those are the two basic distinctions.

Numerary assistants are women members of Opus Dei who are celibate, they are numeraries but they are dedicated primarily to the tasks of hospitality in taking care of the centers of Opus Dei and the other programs and activities where it's

required to have people who are experts, who have been educated, received their degrees in hospitality, hotel management and they take care of all of that aspect of the development of the activities of Opus Dei.

There are about 2,000 priests in Opus Dei. That is to say these are men who were ordained specifically for Opus Dei just like a priest is ordained for a particular diocese, priests are ordained for Opus Dei. In addition to the priests who are members of Opus Dei and who serve the other members of Opus Dei around the world, there are also diocesan priests who can discover that they have a vocation as well to pursue this way of life as a member of Opus Dei. Because they are priests they don't join as lay people do, but there is an organization called the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, which is inseparably united to the prelatore

of Opus Dei, it's part of the organization but it's exclusively for priests, The members of that organization are the priests who are in the prelature of Opus Dei and other diocesan priests who join, remaining in their own dioceses, under their own Bishop, not changing anything of their situation within the church, but they come to Opus Dei, to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross in order to receive the same benefits as the lay people.

A cooperator is a person who is not a member of Opus Dei, has not received a vocation to be in Opus Dei, but who is very interested in what Opus Dei is doing, and agrees to pray for the activities of Opus Dei, and to support them either financially or with their time, their work, somehow to help materially the activities. A person becomes a cooperator by asking if they can and they are appointed a cooperator and they

agree then to undertake these responsibilities in return for that. Of course, the people in Opus Dei pray for the people who are cooperators and the church grants cooperators particular graces for the work that they're doing in collaborating with Opus Dei.

Anybody can be a cooperator. You don't have to be Catholic, you don't have to even be Christian, you could be Jewish, you could be Muslim, you could be Buddhist, you could be atheist. Now, in the cases of people who don't believe in God, they're not going to pray for Opus Dei, obviously, which is one of the things a cooperator ordinarily does, but they are in spirit supporting Opus Dei, as well as materially.

5. How does one become a member of Opus Dei?

Fr. Barrett:

... a person becomes a member of Opus Dei because they've been in contact with activities of Opus Dei, members of Opus Dei for some time, they've attended different things, they are growing in the understanding of the spirit of Opus Dei and then at a certain moment they feel God is calling them to this way of life, and I've often said to people who are wondering, should I be in Opus Dei or not? Am I being called to this or not? That when the time comes you'll know it, clear as a bell for sure, and invariably that's the case. Now everybody has his own story but it's a very clear moment when the person senses God wants me to live this way of life and to join Opus Dei. And at that point they write a letter and ask to join. Once they've begun the process of joining Opus Dei there are, a number of months go by where they learn more about what Opus Dei is all about. They are given talks, a series of talks

that help them to make sure they know everything about Opus Dei there is to know because they're coming into this organization. At the end of six months, and receiving all of these talks, spending more time in spiritual direction with the priests of Opus Dei, really getting to grow in their spiritual life, learning more about how to pray, they ask if they want to continue, if they really feel still that this is what God is calling them to. At that point, they become members of Opus Dei.

6. What does Opus Dei provide for its members?

Fr. Barrett:

What Opus Dei gives is the means for the person to be who the person wants to be in terms of being close to God, being integrated with faith and work and social life, and so Opus Dei provides the coaching, and it does so in a Catholic context because the

doctrine that's being given, the moral teachings are all Catholic teachings. The average person doesn't really have time to pursue those things all by himself, to go off to a library and learn these things or to study them. So Opus Dei is just providing a wonderful context where they can come and receive these teachings, and it helps them then to live their lives as Catholics in the middle of the world, being very clearly Catholic and at the same time, very much a professional in whatever field that they're doing. And so Opus Dei provides it through the activities of talks, classes, retreats, workshops, all kinds of ways that members of Opus Dei are receiving the doctrine, the teachings of the church, but also learning how to pray. And the people learn how to pray, both in these kinds of talks and activities, but also one on one. The only way you learn something really is somebody has to take you by the hand and show you

how to do it, and in Opus Dei we do that. We're taking people by the hand and teaching them how to pray. Mostly it's lay people with lay people. It's the lay person who is a little bit older, you might say, more experienced, big brother, big sister, taking the other person along and saying here's how you get your prayer life going. You have to spend a certain amount of time every day in mental prayer if you really want to get close to Jesus and get to know him, meditating on his life, meditating on the things he said he did. You have to also get to Mass to be able to have the Eucharist as a strengthening force in your life to be able to maintain this love of God that's then going to spread out to the love of neighbor. Somebody has to explain this to you and show you step by step that it's good to pray the rosary, to pray it every day, because to be close to our Lady is a crucial way of being close to our Lord.

Somebody has to show you to make an examination of conscience at the end of the day, to stop and spend a few minutes and think, how did my day go? Did I do what I was supposed to? Did I really pray today? What are the things I did that I regret doing that I have to ask God's pardon next time I go to the sacrament of reconciliation, which again, somebody has to help you learn how to make a good confession. How to take advantage of the sacrament of reconciliation. So these things come through the talks and the general activities but they also come through personal spiritual direction of a friend to a friend, a brother to a brother, a sister to a sister, that is complemented with the priests of Opus Dei also providing spiritual direction. In Opus Dei a member receives spiritual direction from both the lay person and the priest in his or her effort to grow in holiness, to establish a firm base of prayer life,

we call it the plan of life, and the plan is the plan of prayer life, of what do we do on a daily basis, no matter what, in order to keep up our prayer life and then the rest of our life fits in around that plan of prayerfulness, of contemplation.

7. What are the "norms" that Opus Dei members try to live?

Fr. Barrett:

Specifically what we mean by the norms are a member of Opus Dei does a half hour of mental prayer in the morning, a half hour of mental prayer in the evening. A member goes to Mass every day, prays the rosary every day, every day finds time to do about fifteen minutes of spiritual reading, which includes a few minutes of reading scripture, as well as some spiritual book, every day making an examination of conscience at the end of the day for two or three minutes, every day

trying to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Apart from going to Mass, members of Opus Dei will try to stop by a church on their way to work or on their way home, somewhere along the line and pray for a few minutes in front of the Blessed Sacrament. Once a week the person tries to get to the sacrament of reconciliation. Every month the person in Opus Dei will make an evening of recollection which is a mini-retreat that lasts about two hours, it's just a time to be quiet and pray and get to confession and think about things, and then once a year to make a retreat, as well as once a year to make a workshop that last several days, which is a kind of an opportunity for the members of Opus Dei to come together, live fraternity, pray together and renew their knowledge of the teachings of the church in a formal way through classes that are structured very much like a university or a college. And so

those are the norms, that's the plan of life. That's sort of the backbone upon which then, the rest of the person's life, rests and is built...

8. Why does Opus Dei stress personal prayer?

Fr. Barrett:

Prayer is conversation with God about the things that are important to us because God is our father. So whatever is going on in our lives is of interest to him. We may think that a lot of the things fall outside of God's interest because they have to do with work or chores or tasks that we're undertaking, or contradictions that have nothing to do with the spiritual life, God is interested in everything. He wants to hear about everything in our lives. And so prayer is conversation with him about what we're wrestling with, what we're dealing with. We try and put it in the context of understanding God's

position, trying to see the things through the eyes of God, how do we do that? By getting to know God better. By getting to know the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in our prayer, principally through the Son. When we know Jesus, and we can know him because we can read his life, we can meditate on the scriptures, we can see what he did, what he said, what he spoke about, and we can try and get into his heart and understand who he is because that reveals to us who we are. And then when we know Jesus he brings us to the Father, he brings us to the Holy Spirit, and of course, even the Holy Spirit is there helping us to know Jesus, prompting our hearts to want to know God better. So prayer is that conversation about almost anything you can think of. It doesn't have to be formal and throughout the day there can be countless little prayers where we turn to God, we ask for his help, we ask for his

guidance, we just share with him our feelings in that particular moment, whether they're exhilaration, feelings of exhilaration or feelings of discouragement because of what we're going through, but God is our Father, God is our friend, he's there all the time, we want to deal with him all the time as we would any good friend who's in our life, we keep in touch. There's formal prayer and that's why things like the rosary or even attending Mass are more formal because they follow a form, they follow a pattern that's set and established, vocal prayers that we learn when we were children that we repeat, the Hail Mary, the Our Father, the Glory Be to the Father, but that's one part of prayer, and the other part is this, this more intimate, personal kind of dialogue with our Lord and it's not something that's magical, it's not something that's spectacular, but it's clear that God, at times, when we give him the chance to speak to us,

does speak to us. If we can be quiet, if we can go into a place where we can be alone with our Lord, and give him a chance to talk to us, he will. Sometimes we may think that those inspirations are just our own ruminations, that we come up with some pretty good ideas because we took the time to sit and think. But I think honestly we often recognize that was something beyond what I could have just dreamed up myself. It's our Lord gently guiding me in a direction of how to conduct my affairs in this matter, how to handle this decision that I have to make, what to do in my professional career, what to do in my family life, the circumstances that I'm facing, God speaks to us through prayer to help us to make very good decisions but not to make them all alone, to make them with him in our lives helping us, coaching us in a sense.

9. What is Opus Dei's apostolic mission?

Fr. Barrett:

St. Josemaria liked to point out that our Lord told the Apostles, after he rose from the dead in the upper room, as the Father has sent me, so I also send you. And so Jesus sent the Apostles forth into the world to bring the good news, to bring the message that God has come among us, that he died and redeemed us, and that he's risen from the dead. And the most conceptual notion, that is apostolate, is that we have to be Apostles, we have to follow in the footsteps of the twelve, and go out into the world and spread the good news. We do it in the things that we're going to be doing anyway as people in the middle of the society in which we find ourselves. That apostolate may take on a more corporate nature because, again, people come together and

collaborate in different activities that are of an apostolic nature, but it's still fundamentally a thing of one person reaching the heart of another person and telling him, this is what I've discovered about God, about Jesus, and this is what I want to share with you because it's a great thing and I want you to know about it. Take it or leave it, but I want you to know about it, and that the apostolate is really personal, it's on the level of individuals with individuals, that's the heart of it. And then from there it grows into all kinds of other activities that these people then decide that are appropriate to help spread the word even more and to get things out into a wider part of society.

Opus Dei is apostolic because St. Josemaria would point out that if your interior life is strong, it's going to overflow into the life around you, that our apostolate is the overflow of

our interior life. And it's a crucial part of being who we are. If a person is in love but doesn't want to share that with anybody, you'd wonder how much in love the person really is. And in Opus Dei it's the same thing. If we say I'm really excited about the message that God has revealed to me in my prayer life and in my vocation, but I don't feel like I want to share with anybody else, you'd have to question whether, oh, well, maybe the message isn't really that strong after all in your heart. So apostolate is crucial to the way a person lives his life in Opus Dei, that he necessarily has to reach out to the people around himself or herself because of this overflow of the interior life

10. What are some of the key works of Opus Dei?

Fr. Barrett:

People come to Opus Dei, and like everybody else they have ideals, they have ideas, they have things they want to do to help the world be better. When Opus Dei comes into their life it's a big part of strengthening them in those ideals and even being more committed. And so, really, the works of Opus Dei are individual people coming together, some of whom are members of Opus Dei, with their friends, their colleagues, recognizing that there's a need in society for a university, a hospital, a clinic, a school, some social program for inner city kids, whatever the case may be, and they get together and they say, let's do it. And they do it with this added dimension of, to give Glory to God, not just to do a good thing, but in a way to give praise to God through doing this.

The works that Opus Dei are involved with, members of Opus Dei

are involved with are all over the world and there are universities in a dozen countries where the members of Opus Dei have founded those universities and are the force behind making them succeed, sometimes in very poor countries where this is the only opportunity people will get a university education. Members of Opus Dei have started hospital and clinics in different parts of South America, Central America, Europe, and some of those clinics give the best medical care in that place and with very limited means at times. Some members of Opus Dei have gone into fostering programs to teach rural people how to do better farming, how to raise cattle in a better way, especially in Latin America and some of the rural countries where farming is still a very important part of the social life and the economic life of the people...

In the United States there are schools that have been founded and are organized and run by members of Opus Dei, along with other people. In Washington D.C. there's a school called the Heights for boys, a school for girls called Oakcrest. In Chicago there's a school called Northridge for boys, and Willows, another school for girls. Chicago also has a wonderful activity which is a program that is supplementary to the school's activity, that the children attend schools and then come to Midtown or to Metro to learn more about reading and math skills, to be able to enter into high school and beyond, enter into college and beyond.

In New York City we have activities for children in the Bronx, Crotona, a program for boys and Rosedale, a program for girls, and again, it's a program that supplements what they're learning in their own schools

but coming after school to be tutored by people who are volunteers, many of whom are not members of Opus Dei, but are young professionals who want to lend a hand and teach these children what they need to know so that they will finish high school and hopefully finish college and be able to go onto a productive life.

Each of these works operates independently as its own organization with its own board. It's usually a 501(c)(3) and it has, it's set up as a charitable organization, not-for-profit. So each activity raises the funds it needs in order to conduct the activities it's trying to carry out.

11. How is Opus Dei financially supported?

Fr. Barrett:

The money that supports Opus Dei comes from the members of Opus Dei who make contributions and

they do so with great generosity, but at the same it's supported by other people, as the cooperators of Opus Dei who agree to pray and support financially the activities of the organization, and people of good will who just see what Opus Dei is doing and they make contributions to help Opus Dei conduct its affairs.

... Opus Dei, St. Josemaria used to say, is poor and always will be poor because we're always reaching beyond our means in order to be able to do more for more people. So however much money we have, and right now it's not really a great deal of money, we have more needs than we can meet in order to do the good that we're trying to do. So, in a sense Opus Dei is always on a tight budget, we're always poor, trying to do more with less.

12. How is penance and mortification practiced in Opus Dei?

Fr. Barrett:

Part of prayer life is that we pray not only our heart and our minds but we also pray with our bodies. We pray as persons, body and soul, so that mortification becomes a very important part of the prayer life of anybody who is striving for holiness. In the history of the church, the saints have always emphasized the importance of penance, sacrifice, self-denial, mortification in order to grow closer to God. St. Josemaria, following on the footsteps of all those great saints and that spirituality, indicated that penance and mortification were crucial to our being able to grow closer to God.

The forms of mortification that are most common are doing your work well, finishing things on time, being

punctual to start things on time, putting up with contradictions of everyday life with a cheerful attitude. If the car breaks down, you don't feel well, it's raining out, it's cold, you just take those things and be cheerful and joyful about them. Those are the ordinary mortifications. Smiling when you don't feel like it because you're dealing with a person who annoys you. These are things that St. Josemaria said make the heart of our life of penance.

What are the corporal mortifications practiced by some celibate members?

Fr. Barrett:

... in order to grow even closer for those people who are trying to go deeper in their spiritual understanding of the redemptive sufferings and to really grow in spirituality, he recommended traditional practices of corporal

mortification that had been in the church for centuries, such as using a cilice...

These are corporal mortifications that were practiced throughout the centuries of the church. Mother Theresa used these things. Padre Pio, the earlier saints, St. Francis, St. Dominic, all used these kinds of practices of corporal mortification along with fasting, abstaining from meat, things that are probably more understood in the universal Church as ways that -- and even beyond the Church as ways that we grow in spirituality that we have to deny ourselves some of the comforts of this life in order to be open to the spiritual.

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