

OPUS DEI

Manuel Sanchez[♦]

Opus Dei's work of spiritual formation complements the work of local churches. People who join Opus Dei or attend its activities continue to belong to their local dioceses. Opus Dei was founded in 1928. It was approved by the bishop of Madrid in 1941 and by the Holy See in 1947. Since 1982, Opus Dei has been a personal prelature of the Catholic Church.

The apostolic work of the members of Opus Dei, like that of many other Catholics, seeks to bring about Christian renewal, the benefits of which will, with the grace of God, be experienced by parishes and local Churches throughout the world. These include conversions, a greater participation in the Eucharist, more assiduous reception of the other sacraments, the spreading of the Gospel message to many who are distant from the faith, initiatives on behalf of those in need, helping out with catechism courses and other parish activities, and cooperation with diocesan bodies. This apostolate of Opus Dei is carried out within the framework of its specific charism, namely the sanctification of work and of the circumstances and events of ordinary life.

Opus Dei aims to foster unity of all the faithful of the Prelature with the diocesan pastors, encouraging them to put into practice the directives and guidelines issued by the diocesan bishops and the Episcopal conference.

1. Personal Prelatures

The idea of the juridical structure known as the personal prelature was introduced by the Second Vatican Council. The Council decree

[♦]**Manuel Sanchez** (Spain) is a journalist and lawyer. He is at present the Coordinator of the Information Office of the Prelature of Opus Dei in Rome. E-mail: international@opusdei.org

Presbyterorum ordinis (December 7, 1965), 10, stated that, "special dioceses or personal prelatures" could be established "to carry out special pastoral tasks in different regions or among any race in any part of the world." The Council wanted a new juridical figure which was to be flexible in nature, in order to contribute to the effective spreading of the Christian message and Christian life. Personal prelatures are established within the hierarchical structure of the Church, with the special feature that the faithful of the prelate continue to belong to their local church and to the diocese where they live. Thus, personal prelatures are clearly different from religious institutes and the consecrated life in general, as well as from associations and movements of the faithful. Personal prelatures have a prelate, secular priests, and men and women lay faithful, united as a single organism to carry out the prelate's mission. In Opus Dei's case, this mission is to spread the ideal of holiness in the world.

2. The Opus Dei Prelature

Opus Dei already formed a single organism made up of laity and priests cooperating in a pastoral and apostolic task which was international in its scope. This specific Christian mission consisted of spreading the ideal of holiness in the world – in daily work and in the ordinary circumstances of life.

Pope Paul VI and his successors decided that a study should be undertaken of the possibility of giving Opus Dei a juridical form suited to its true nature. In the light of the documents of the Council, this form was to be that of a personal prelate. In 1969 work started on this, with both members of the Holy See and of Opus Dei taking part, and was completed in 1981. The document establishing Opus Dei as a Personal Prelature was the apostolic constitution *Ut sit* (28 November 1982), which was formally executed on 19 March 1983. At the same time the Pope promulgated the Statutes, which constitute the particular pontifical law of the Opus Dei Prelature. The Statutes were the same as those prepared by the founder years before, with some minor amendments.

3. Relations with the Dioceses

The Opus Dei Prelature is a jurisdictional structure belonging to the pastoral and hierarchical organisation of the Church. It has its own autonomy and ordinary jurisdiction to carry out its mission in the service of the whole Church. For that reason it is dependent immediately and directly on the Roman Pontiff, through the Congregation for Bishops. The authority of the prelate has to do only

with the specific mission of the Prelature, and is thus in harmony with the authority of the diocesan bishop regarding the ordinary pastoral care of the faithful of the diocese:

a) The lay faithful of Opus Dei are subject to the authority of the Prelate in all that refers to the fulfilment of the ascetical, formational, and apostolic commitments which they take up by the formal declaration incorporating them into the Prelature. By virtue of their content, these commitments do not interfere with the authority of the diocesan bishop. At the same time, the lay faithful of Opus Dei continue to be faithful of the dioceses in which they reside, and thus remain under the authority of the diocesan bishop.

b) The deacons and priests incardinated in the Prelature belong to the secular clergy and are fully under the authority of the Prelate. They are to foster fraternal relations with the members of the diocesan presbyterate, and observe with all due care the general discipline of the clergy. They can form part of the council of priests of the diocese. Diocesan bishops may, with the prior consent of the Prelate or his vicar, appoint a priest of the presbyterate of the Prelature to a position or office in the diocese.

Opus Dei's Statutes (title IV, chapter V) lay down criteria for ensuring a harmonious relationship between the Prelature and the dioceses within whose territory the Prelature carries out its specific mission. The Prelature always maintains relations with diocesan authorities, and regularly informs diocesan bishops of its activities. Some characteristics of this relationship are the following:

i) Opus Dei never begins its apostolic work or establishes any centre without the prior consent of the local bishop.

ii) When it wishes to erect a church of the Prelature, or to entrust to the Prelature an existing church or a parish, an agreement is drawn up between the diocesan bishop and the Prelate or the relevant regional vicar.

iii) The regional authorities of the Prelature regularly keep in touch with the dioceses in which they carry out their pastoral and apostolic work, and with the Episcopal conferences.

4. Message

Work, family life, and other ordinary activities are occasions for spiritual union with Jesus Christ.

Work done well is an offering to God: As the Second Vatican Council noted, every baptized person is called to follow Jesus Christ by living according to the Gospel and making it known to others. The aim of

Opus Dei is to contribute to that evangelizing mission of the Church, by promoting among Christians of all social classes a life fully consistent with their faith, in the midst of the ordinary circumstances of their lives and especially through the sanctification of their work.

The following are some of the main features of the spirit of Opus Dei:

Divine filiation: "Divine filiation is the foundation of the spirit of Opus Dei," said its founder, St. Josemaría Escrivá. The Christian is a child of God by virtue of baptism. The formation provided by the Prelature seeks to foster among the Christian faithful a deep awareness of their being children of God. It fosters confidence in divine providence, simplicity in their dialogue with God, a deep awareness of the dignity of each human being and of the need for fraternity among all people, a truly Christian love for the world and for all human realities created by God, and a sense of calmness and optimism.

Ordinary life: "It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind," said St. Josemaría. The family, marriage, work – all of our activities – are opportunities for dealing with and imitating Jesus Christ, trying to practice charity, patience, humility, diligence, integrity, cheerfulness and all the other human and Christian virtues.

Sanctifying work: It means to work with the spirit of Jesus Christ, to work competently and ethically, with the aim of loving God and serving others, and thus to sanctify the world from within, making the Gospel present in all activities whether they be outstanding or humble and hidden. In the eyes of God what matters is the love that is put into work, not its human success.

Prayer and sacrifice: The formation given by Opus Dei encourages prayer and sacrifice to sustain the efforts to sanctify one's ordinary occupations. Thus members strive to incorporate into their lives certain practices of Christian piety, such as prayer, daily Mass, sacramental confession, and reading and meditating on the Gospel. Devotion to Our Lady occupies an important place in their hearts. Also, to imitate Jesus Christ, they try to acquire a spirit of penance offering sacrifices, particularly those that help them fulfil their duties faithfully and make life more pleasant for others, things like renouncing small pleasures, fasting, almsgiving, etc.

Unity of life: St Josemaría explained that Christians working in the world should not live "a kind of double life. On the one hand, an interior life, a life of union with God; and on the other, a separate and distinct professional, social and family life." On the contrary, "There

is just one life, made of flesh and spirit. And it is this life which has to become, in both soul and body, holy and filled with God."

Freedom: The members of Opus Dei are ordinary citizens who enjoy the same rights and are subject to the same obligations as other citizens. In their professional, family, political, financial or cultural activities, they act with freedom and personal responsibility, not involving the Church or Opus Dei in their decisions, nor presenting those decisions as the only Catholic solutions.

Charity: "Side by side with our colleagues, friends and relatives and sharing their interests, we can help them come closer to Christ," wrote St. Josemaría. The wish to make others know Christ, which is a direct consequence of charity (that is, the love of God above all things and of one's neighbour as oneself), cannot be separated from the desire to contribute to finding solutions to the material needs and social problems of one's surroundings.