

What is Opus Dei?

The full title of the organisation known as Opus Dei (the Work of God) is 'The Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei'. It was founded in Madrid on 2 October 1928 by a Spanish priest, Josemaria Escriva (1902-1975), beginning with small weekly gatherings of laymen, later extended to include women (1930) and priests (1943). In 1946 Escriva settled in Rome, and Opus Dei began to spread throughout Europe, coming to England that same year.

In 1982, Opus Dei was established as the first, and so far only, Personal Prelature, with its particular law (the Statutes) approved by the Vatican. It is governed by a Prelate, appointed by the Pope, the current Prelate being Bishop Javier Echevarria (1932-).

Escriva was beatified by Pope John Paul II in May 1992.

What does Opus Dei teach?

Opus Dei was approved by the Vatican in 1950. In line with modern Catholicism, it emphasises that everyone is called to holiness. The institution exists primarily to promote the sanctification of its own members and to equip and encourage them to bring the message of Opus Dei (the possibility of living a truly Christian life in the midst of the world) to their families, friends and colleagues. Emphasis is placed on the need for those seeking to attain holiness to be under the personal supervision of a spiritual director, to engage in regular public and private prayer and devotions, and to make spiritual, moral and doctrinal study a central part of their lives.

Where is Opus Dei to be found and what does it do?

Opus Dei is active in over 45 countries around the world. Individuals need not change their work on becoming members and are free to run or own shares in any business concern, or be employed in any section of trade, industry or public services. Opus Dei as such owns or runs no enterprises. Instead, it encourages members to run 'corporate apostolic undertakings'. There are now hundreds of these, often registered as charities, administered and staffed by Opus Dei members and others. In Britain these include student hostels, youth clubs, catering colleges for women and cultural and social centres. Elsewhere Opus Dei has universities (including the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome), schools, publishing houses, business schools, agricultural training schemes, and primary health care projects.

How is Opus Dei organised?

Opus Dei is directed by the Prelate and his vicars, who are assisted by councils made up mainly of lay people. There are several sorts of members: numeraries, associate members and supernumeraries.

Male *numeraries* are priests and celibate laymen. They normally live in centres and, except for the priest-members, work

in professional jobs, or full time in one of the 'corporate works' of Opus Dei. Apart from what they need to live on, numeraries give their earnings to the apostolic undertakings of Opus Dei. The formation of other members is entrusted to numeraries who prepare themselves for this task by extensive studies in philosophy and theology. Female numeraries come under the same regulations as their male counterparts except that, following Roman Catholic teaching, they may not be ordained priests.

There are also '*assistant numeraries*' who do the service and maintenance work in the Opus Dei centres. There is strict segregation between male and female living quarters.

Associate members are like numeraries in most respects, but for personal reasons do not live in Opus Dei centres.

Supernumeraries do not necessarily lead celibate lives; they are often married with children and live with their families. They engage in many kinds of work, contribute financially to Opus Dei according to their circumstances, and attend an Opus Dei centre weekly for spiritual guidance and confession.

All members try to attend daily Mass and engage in private prayer and devotions. Their working and social lives are organised around the pursuit of personal sanctity.

Associated with Opus Dei, but not members, are people known as '*co-operators*'. They do not have to be Catholic or even Christian, and include anyone who has a friendly association with Opus Dei, especially those who donate funds or time and expertise to the work associated with Opus Dei.

Who joins?

Only Roman Catholics who have the conviction (which must be shared by the directors of Opus Dei) that they are called by God to do so, may join. There are roughly 80,000 members worldwide, of whom about 1,750 are priests. Some 500 members reside in Britain.

Many members were originally introduced to Opus Dei by a friend, the faithful of the Prelature being strongly encouraged to spread the message of Opus Dei, and to teach their friends and relatives how they can do their work well and sanctify it, raise their families rightly (if they are married), and carry out the apostolate in their own environment. Children frequently follow in the footsteps of one or both of their parents. Others hear about Opus Dei through their parish, or through a Catholic priest suggesting they should get in touch with the organisation.

In accordance with Roman Catholic Canon Law, no commitment can be made by anyone under 18 and Opus Dei says that not only does it encourage interested young people to speak with their parents or legal guardians before becoming involved, but also that no lifetime commitment to the organisation is possible before the age of 23.

Problems, controversies, causes of concern

The psychological and emotional pressures not to leave Opus Dei are not dissimilar to those associated with leaving any organisation with a close 'family-like' structure. People are, however, free to leave if they wish after a considered decision, and the Opus Dei maintains that most former members continue to enjoy good relations with the organisation, many of them as 'co-operators'. There are, however, several who, having left perhaps 15 to 25 years ago, are highly critical of the organisation.

Opus Dei has been accused of being involved in various political and financial scandals, of exclusiveness and secrecy, and of promoting dependency and unquestioning obedience from its members. It has also been charged with exerting undue pressure and deception, especially in the recruitment of young people, and of separating them from their families. Opus Dei has always insisted such allegations are completely false.

The ascetic practices of some members, especially the wearing of the 'cilice' (a spiked chain) around the thigh for an hour or so daily, and the use of 'the discipline' (a scourge made of string), have caused concern to many both inside and outside the RC Church. Opus Dei insists that such practices are traditional, are used in some religious orders of the Catholic Church as well as in Opus Dei, and are not as dramatic as they sound but a symbolic identification with the sufferings of Christ, rather than a desire to encourage feelings of guilt and victimisation.

There are those from certain sections of the Roman Catholic Church who have said that Opus Dei practises a kind of spirituality that they describe as self-seeking and individualistic. Opus Dei responds that there are many spiritualities available within the Catholic Church and that Opus Dei offers just one of them, which should be respected like all the others.

Concern has also been expressed at the extent of the legalism surrounding the functioning of Opus Dei, and some are unhappy at the rapid progress being made towards the process of canonisation of the founder, and about the powerful positions that Opus Dei members are said to hold in the Vatican. (For example, the Vatican's spokesman is a member of Opus Dei.)

Further information

Available from Opus Dei centres and from bookshops:

Josemaria Escriva (1987) *The Way*. Chicago: Scepter. [An aid to personal prayer]

Manuel Cabello (ed.) (1968/1993) *Conversations with Mgr. Escriva*, Princeton: Scepter, [Collection of interviews by *Time Magazine*, *The Herald Tribune*, etc with the founder about Opus Dei and various criticisms levelled against it.]

Dominique le Tourneau (2002) *What is Opus Dei?* Leominster, Gracewing.

Peter Berglar (1994) *Opus Dei: Life and Work of its Founder* Princeton: Scepter.

Peter Bristow (2001) *Opus Dei: Christians in the midst of the world*, London, Catholic Truth Society booklet.

Helena Scott and Ethel Tolansky (2001) *Josemaria Escriva*, London, Catholic Truth Society booklet

Michael Walsh (1989) *The Secret World of Opus Dei*. London: Grafton, 1989. [Adopts a critical approach to Opus Dei.]

William O'Connor (1999) *Opus Dei, an Open Book*. Dublin: Mercier. [An Opus Dei member's reply to Walsh's book.]

Websites:

Opus Dei official site: <http://www.opusdei.org>

ODAN (Opus Dei Awareness Network) 'provides education, outreach and support to those adversely impacted by Opus Dei': <http://www.odan.org/index.html>

Opus Dei UK Headquarters:

4 Orme Court, London W2 4RL. Tel: 020 7229 7574.

Information Office: 6, Orme Court. Tel: 020 7221 9176

Further information about Opus Dei, and other religious movements, may be obtained by contacting INFORM

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- * by putting you in touch with a nation-wide network of experts with specialist knowledge concerning NRMs
- * by putting you in touch with people who can give counselling, legal advice - or just lend a sympathetic ear
- * by putting you in touch with ex-members or families who have personal experience of a particular group.

New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information.

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