

José Luis Gutiérrez, *The Prelature of Opus Dei and ecclesial movements. Ecclesiological and canonical aspects*, en [www.collationes.org](http://www.collationes.org).

## The Prelature of Opus Dei and ecclesial movements. Ecclesiological and canonical aspects

### *Preliminary observations*

1. All ecclesial realities, of whatever nature, participate in the same life and goal of the one Church. All, therefore, are called to live in the same ecclesial communion and to maintain between each other relations of mutual regard. Only from this theological and spiritual perspective will it be possible to explain the differences between hierarchical entities and institutions of an associative nature (institutions of consecrated life, so-called “movements,” and so forth).

2. If the Prelature of Opus Dei or a diocese or military ordinariate are examined from the perspective of the activities of their faithful, one will encounter many similarities with ecclesial movements. In fact, it is evident that both dioceses or prelatures as well as ecclesial movements endeavor to spread the Christian spirit among all people within their circles of activity, with fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church and with a coherence of life. It can well be said that, sociologically, there are many similarities. Therefore, the differences will need to be sought in the appropriate ambit, which is the ecclesiological and, inseparably, the juridical-canonical, distinguishing between those that are forms of an hierarchical self-organization of the Church itself and other realities that arise in the body of the Church as fruits of the initiative and autonomy of the faithful.

### *The insertion of Opus Dei in the institutional organization of the Church*

#### *The institutional organization of the Church*

3. The hierarchical and institutional organization of the Church, in both its universal and particular dimensions, is necessarily built upon the relationship between the clergy and laity, in

which each is reciprocally responsible and ordered to the other.<sup>1</sup> The People of God and each of their portions or parts are gatherings of laity and clergy, hierarchically structured, at the head of which there is normally a bishop and in which all participate in the totality of the mission of the Church, each one in and from within his own state and condition in life.

4. While always respecting divine law (the role of the episcopacy, the ministerial priesthood, the laity, etc.), it is clear that the institutional organization of the Church is arranged in different ways in the course of history: The most common form of that organization—in the Latin rite Church—are the dioceses, but there are also prelatures, personal ordinariates for the military, or for Anglicans returning to the Catholic Church, apostolic vicariates, and so forth. In effect, in a discourse to the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, John Paul II affirmed, “If the ordinary pastoral organization is not, in fact, able to reach the numerous groups of people understood as falling within the phenomenon of emigration [and the same could be said of other groupings of the faithful], their right to evangelization and to a normal Christian life will require an adequate response, as far as is possible, through specific initiatives and appropriate structures, adapted to the persons and circumstances. Once more, we must be mindful that the salvation of souls is always the supreme criterion of all possible organization. *Salus animarum suprema lex.*”<sup>2</sup>

#### *Opus Dei in the institutional organization of the Church*

5. When the moment came to give a definitive juridical configuration to Opus Dei, it was extended in many dioceses the world over, and it was seen “as an apostolic organism composed of priests and laity, both men and women, simultaneously both organic and undivided, that is to say, as an institution endowed with a unity of spirit, of aims, of government and of formation.”<sup>3</sup>

6. Opus Dei, therefore, was to have as its mission an apostolic task<sup>4</sup> harmonically inserted into the pastoral work of the Church, a task that could not be completed without the joint

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1 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 10.

2 John Paul II, Discourse of October 21, 1993 to the plenary assembly of Pontifical Council for Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People: “Insegnamenti” XVI/2 (1993), p. 1076.

3 John Paul II, Ap. Const. *Ut sit*, November 28, 1982: AAS 75 (1983) 423. Cf. Idem, Discourse of March 3, 2001.

4 In the Ap. Const. *Ut sit*, this mission is described as follows: “... not only to illuminate with new lights the mission of the laity in the Church and in society, but also to put it into practice; it has also endeavored to put into practice the teaching of the

participation and mutual cooperation —an absolute necessity— of clergy and laity. It had the conditions needed to form and incardinate its own priests who would have full ministerial dedication to the faithful of Opus Dei and to its apostolates. Moreover, it was an organic body, hierarchically structured, in which there was a head (a prelate) with his presbyterate and lay faithful: it therefore possessed all the requirements to be inserted by the Pope into the institutional organization of the Church, specifically under the juridical figure of a personal prelature, as foreseen by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>5</sup>

### *Movements*

7. Catholic movements, which, of course, as a development of their own operative dynamism, exist and develop their lives within the Church, do not form part of the institutional organization of the Church, but, rather, are a consequence of the right of association of their members, who get together for a purpose recognized by ecclesiastical authority. At the present time, the ecclesial entities that can be put together under the common heading of “movements” do not have a well-defined juridical configuration, and each of them adopts its own solution suited to its particular characteristics.

8. Concretely, in Catholic movements the aforesaid ministerial relationship involving a hierarchical structure (the structure comprising the *capital* function —the prelate— assisted by its presbyterate on the one hand, and the rest of the faithful on the other hand) does not exist. Of course, vocations to the priesthood are promoted in movements, but those priests ordinarily work in the dioceses to which they belong, dedicating a part of their time to the apostolates of the movement. But even in the case of a full dedication to the movement, they do not constitute a presbyterate of that movement.

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universal call to sanctity, and to promote at all levels of society the sanctification of ordinary work, and by means of ordinary work.”

5 Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 10.

9. Obviously, it is not excluded the possibility that an existing movement be erected by the Pope as a personal prelature, if it can be configured as an organic unity, with a capital function exercised with the collaboration of its own presbyterate, for the ministerial service in favor of the faithful belonging to the movement and its apostolates.

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