



# THE MESSAGE OF OPUS DEI

One of the great successes of the Second Vatican Council was its upgrading of the laity. Told in the 19th century that their duty was “to pray, pay, and obey,” the laity were invited by the Catholic Action movement of Pope Pius XI (1922-1939) to become cooperators in the apostolate of the Church hierarchy. Vatican II (1962-1965) went farther. It opened the door for lay people to work within Church structures. This has brought many blessings: parish councils, pastoral councils (at the diocesan level), lay Eucharistic ministers and lectors, and the whole array of “lay ministries” with which we are familiar today.

This success has been purchased, however, at the price of grave failure: the neglect of the laity’s primary call: “to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth” (LG 33) – in other words, *outside* Church structures, *in the public square*. It is not difficult to find parish priests today who measure their pastoral success by the number of lay people they can enlist for some form of Church service. These men are good and zealous pastors of souls. But their view of the laity’s role is too restricted.

“The laity bring the Church to the world,” writes Martin Rhonheimer, a Swiss Opus Dei priest and professor at the Work’s Roman Santa Croce University, “not by functioning as the long arm of the hierarchy but simply by reason of the fact that they are baptized Christians and so called by God to the work of redemption. The ordinary faithful do not live ‘in the Church.’ They live in their families, in society, at their jobs, which only rarely happen to be ecclesiastical ones” (p. 81).

Rhonheimer is right. We are grateful to Vatican II for making it possible for lay people to serve within Church structures, and for every lay person who volunteers to do so. But the vast majority of the baptized will never undertake such work. Nor is there any reason why they should do so, provided that, through the quality of their lives, they are bringing Christ to union hall, school, law, medicine, journalism, music, art; and actively caring for those whom life, or natural disasters, have left behind. These are the tasks for which all have been commissioned in baptism and confirmation. Amid today’s plethora of workshops and training courses for lectors, Communion ministers, and parish council members, how much assistance are we giving people to live their faith in daily life?

This is the task for which St. Josemaría Escrivá founded Opus Dei. He taught the Work’s members “love of the world.” This raises a difficulty. For centuries Catholic spirituality had viewed “the world” as the enemy of believers, an obstacle to union with God and holiness. This view is at the heart of monastic spirituality, from which Catholics serious about the pursuit of holiness were encouraged to take whatever elements they could, consistent with their worldly lives.

There were always dissenters from this tradition. St. Francis of Assisi and St. Francis de Sales insisted that all are called to perfection, whatever their station in life. Vatican II rediscovered and explic-

itly stated this truth when it said: “It is therefore quite clear that all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of love” (LG 40).

Is “the world,” then, friend or foe? To answer this question, we must recognize that the Gospels use the world “world” in two different senses. In John’s Gospel, the Greek word *kosmos* – “the world” – occurs no less than 67 times. The statement that “God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten Son” (John 3:16) refers to the world of God’s making: something good, since it comes from our divine Creator. When Jesus says, on the other hand, “You will suffer in the world. But take courage! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33), he is referring to the world of human marring. “It is not the world as such – God’s creation and the natural human habitat,” Rhonheimer writes, “that is man’s enemy, but the ‘world’ of which John speaks: a disordered state of mind and spirit, above all pride, self-conceit, vanity, disordered self-love, and all the vices that spring from these things.” (p. 17) In the book’s final chapter, sub-titled “A stroll through history,” Rhonheimer traces the evolving relationship of the Church to worldly authority. At first persecuted by the Roman Empire, the Church became part of the worldly power structure through the conversion of the

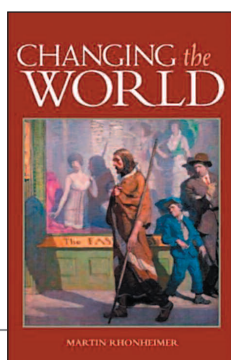
Roman Emperor Constantine in 312. By the high Middle Ages, the Church was asserting, with varying success, that its authority was above all worldly power.

The rise of nation states and the Enlightenment, which culminated in the French Revolution, put the Church again on the defensive. Church insistence throughout what has been called “the long 19th century”

(long, because it lasted well into the century following) that “error has no rights” created a stalemate which was resolved only when Vatican II affirmed that rights belong not to ideas but to persons who are entitled, whatever their beliefs, to religious liberty. With the clarity which he displays throughout the book Rhonheimer writes: “Ultimately, the right of religious freedom is based on the human person’s dignity as a spiritual being, free and responsible, created in the image of God, with a corresponding obligation to seek the truth and adhere to it when known” (p. 101).

In the face of contemporary secularization, which is far more advanced in Europe than in the United States, people ask whether the Church has a future. From the point of view of faith, Rhonheimer writes, the future is bright, since “freedom is always in the end, stronger than coercion [which produces] the appearance of religious penetration [but] leads to a simple external conformity and ends with dissolution, as history has so often demonstrated” (p. 120). I recommend the book as an important correction of much confused thinking and outright misinterpretation of the teaching of Vatican II.

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## CHANGING THE WORLD: THE TIMELINESS OF OPUS DEI by Martin Rhonheimer

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