

OPUS DEI AND SECULAR REALITIES

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More than anything else Opus Dei is a challenge to clericalism—the tendency to identify priests and religious with the church. A clericalist sees the life of the Church as centred on the sacristy and the chancery. The clerical life is one of exercising power over the benighted. The vocation of the post-Vatican II laity, in the updated clericalist mindset, is to participate in this way of life. Therefore a Catholic is most a Christian when he is engaged in a clerical or quasi-clerical activity. Where a clericalist progressive wants the laity to participate as much as possible in clerical activities, and therefore wants the laity to take over the functions of the priest, Opus Dei sees the vocation of the lay Christian as primarily in the world. It appeals not only to domestics and farmers, but also to professional people, who have a sense that their secular work is important and want to make it pleasing to God. That is why Opus Dei has had surprising success among university types, such as Harvard medical and law graduates, and Berkeley and Wellesley graduates; and why it provokes the envious attacks of clericalists, who are disappointed that the professional women that Opus Dei attracts—doctors and physicists—are not clamouring to be ordained priests and share in the exalted life of the clergy. Clericalism is a very serious deformation of Christianity. The person afflicted by it sees the clerical vocation not as one of service and sacrifice, but of power (*Crisis*, March 1995, p. 42).