

Preface

Opus Dei is a technical term that, in the tradition of the Latin Catholic Church that starts from the *Rule of St. Benedict*, designates the liturgy, that is, “the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. . . . In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members” (Vatican Council II, Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, December 4, 1963).

The word *liturgy* (from the Greek *leitourgia*, “public services”) is, however, relatively modern. Before its use was extended progressively, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, we find in its place the Latin *officium*, whose semantic sphere is not easy to define and in which nothing, at least at first glance, would seem to have destined it for its unusual theological success.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory* we investigated the liturgical mystery above all in the face it turns toward God, in its objective or glorious aspect. In this volume our archaeological study is oriented toward the aspect that above all concerns the priests, that is, the subjects to whom belongs, so to speak, the “ministry of the mystery.” And just as in *The Kingdom and the Glory* we sought to clarify the “mystery of the economy,” which theologians had constructed by reversing a Pauline expression that was clear in itself, here it is a matter of tearing the liturgical mystery out of the obscurity and vagueness of the modern literature on the subject, returning it to the rigor and splendor of the great medieval

treatises of Amalarius of Metz and William Durand. The liturgy is, in truth, not very mysterious at all, to the point that one can say that, on the contrary, it coincides with perhaps the most radical attempt to think a praxis that would be absolutely and wholly effective. The mystery of the liturgy is, in this sense, the mystery of effectiveness, and only if one understands this arcane secret is it possible to understand the enormous influence that this praxis, which is only apparently separate, has exercised on the way in which modernity has thought both its ontology and its ethics, its politics and its economy.

As happens in every archaeological study, this one leads us well beyond the sphere from which we started. As the diffusion of the term *office* in the most diverse sectors of social life attests, the paradigm that the *Opus Dei* has offered to human action has been shown to constitute for the secular culture of the West a pervasive and constant pole of attraction. It is more efficacious than the law because it cannot be transgressed, only counterfeited. It is more real than being because it consists only in the operation by means of which it is realized. It is more effective than any ordinary human action because it acts *ex opere operato*, independently of the qualities of the subject who officiates it. For all these reasons, office has exercised on modern culture an influence so profound—that is, subterranean—that we do not even realize that not only does the conceptuality of Kantian ethics and of Kelsen's pure theory of law (to name only two moments, though certainly decisive ones, in its history) depend entirely upon it, but that the political militant and the ministerial functionary are also inspired in the same way by the model of the "acts of office," that is, duties.

The paradigm of the office signified, in this sense, a decisive transformation of the categories of ontology and of praxis, whose importance still remains to be measured. In office or duty, being and praxis, what a human does and what a human is, enter into a zone of indistinction, in which being dissolves into its practical effects and, with a perfect circularity, it is what it has to be and has to be what it is. Operativity and effectiveness define, in this sense, the ontological paradigm that in the course of a

centuries-long process has replaced that of classical philosophy: in the last analysis—this is the thesis that our study will wish to put forward for reflection—being and acting today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real: this is the extent to which office, under the guise of the humble functionary or the glorious priest, has changed from top to bottom the rules of first philosophy as much as those of ethics.

It is possible that today this paradigm is going through a decisive crisis, the results of which cannot be foreseen. Despite the renewed attention toward liturgy in the twentieth century, of which the so-called “liturgical movement” in the Catholic Church on the one hand and the imposing political liturgies of the totalitarian regimes on the other are an eloquent testimony, many signs allow one to think that the paradigm that office or duty has offered to human action is losing its attractive power precisely when it has reached its maximum expansion. Thus, it was all the more necessary to try to establish its characteristics and define its strategies.