

The Secret World of Opus Dei. Michael Walsh. London: Grafton Books (Wm. Collins). 1989. Pp. 219. Price Stg.£11.95.

The average layman's knowledge of Opus Dei is scant. He has heard of their having houses in the big cities where student offspring of wealthy families congregate or take accommodation. Adult members are involved in some big business concerns. And that's about it.

Michael Walsh's book will tell more – much more! But it will not give a clear indication as to whether or not wrong is done in the movement's name. All too frequently argument is couched in phrases like 'it is questionable', 'that is technically true', 'for good or ill'. Many of the author's informants are people who have quit the movement; dissidents are not the most reliable witnesses. But we are left in no doubt about Mr Walsh's views. His final statement alone screams them aloud:

Opus with its rules and regulations, its censorship, its control of the minutiae of members' day-to-day living, its class-related structures, its association with élites of wealth and power . . . could not claim to be a force for liberation. And to the extent that it fails that test, it is not merely, as a sect, less than Catholic . . . It is less than Christian.

So Opus is conservative! But the disciplines of the simple faith which older adults learned in their youth may be just what's needed to combat society's current wave of permissiveness and careless, near sneering attitudes towards organized religion. The author himself, for example, appears to hold the idea of indulgences in contempt (p. 54). Opus refers to some of its dictates as 'discretionary' where the author deems them to be secret. His book's title clashes with Rule 89 of the Opus constitution: ' . . . they are not to hide the fact that they belong . . . and that they are entirely to shun secrecy' (p. 98).

Michael Walsh offers a clear and worthwhile history of Opus Dei – its establishment and development into a strong, organized body that finds favour within the Vatican, that is pressing the case for beatification of its founder, Escrivá de Balaguer. We hear of self-flagellation, hints of heresy and proselytism that disturb greatly, even of connotations suggesting the inclusion of Escrivá in members' interpretation of the 'Our Father'. Anti-feminism is inferred with some justification and *Magill* magazine is the source for the Irish scene where Opus monies and expertise, allegedly, are tied up in certain engineering projects.

However, 'despite its many detractors' says Mr Walsh, Opus Dei 'remains an accepted part of Roman Catholicism' (pp. 171-2). And by the way, Maxim 339 of *El Camino*, the movement's summary of spiritual teaching, says: 'Books – don't buy them without advice from a Catholic who is learned or prudent . . .' This reviewer is neither! But the maxim continues: ' . . . It is easy to buy something useless or harmful. How often a man thinks he is carrying a book under his arm, and it turns out to be a load of dirt!' Michael Walsh adds: the Spanish word here translated 'dirt' is *basura*, which might equally, or perhaps even more appositely, be rendered as 'garbage'.

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