

John ALLEN, *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church*, New York, Doubleday, 2005, 403 pp.

Having read John Allen's book, *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church*, one cannot help but recall the old saw about not judging a book by its cover. At least in its American version, this book's cover (who would have thought that a cross could look so spooky?) promises shadowy intrigue and the unveiling of intricate, long-hidden secrets. The book itself, however, takes us elsewhere. It turns out to be a clear, serious, and sincere treatment of Opus Dei, that is always looking for facts and is consistently suspicious of hearsay. And the average informed reader can only be grateful to Mr. Allen for this.

In his introduction, Allen clearly sets out what he intends to do, and the principles that move him. "This book," he says, "is an attempt to tell the truth on a subject where ideology and fantasy often have the upper hand. Ideology, in my view, is the corruption of reason and is morally akin to lying. Rather than taking an ideological approach here, I try to come at the subject from an experiential and firsthand point of view." These principles lead Allen to favor factual data over theoretical discourse; an interview over a published statement. Some reviewers have criticized him for going a little over-board in his fact finding, but for the most part the facts are helpful, especially when so many critical accusations and intrigue theories fly in the face of them. Nevertheless, there are moments in the book where this journalistic method perhaps obscures rather than reveals. For instance, the significance of St. Josemaría's life and teaching—like that of all saints—is not all that amenable to the kind of "he-said-she-said" analysis he sometimes provides. On this and other matters he does give his own concluding synthesis, but his desire to not take sides often leaves things up in the air unnecessarily. Furthermore, while it would be unfair to criticize Allen for not providing a deep, theological reflection that he never intends to give, there are moments when the theological interpretations of Opus Dei that are presented or implied are debatable. I found little help, for instance, in his presentation of Opus Dei members' participation in public life. Again, his strength—a no-nonsense effort

to get at the “facts”—perhaps becomes a weakness: the *fact* that Opus Dei members act freely, responsibly, and not as minions of a distant hierarchy is mentioned, but it is not explored or fully appreciated. Similar comments could be made about the treatment given to the particular kind of supernatural family that the faithful of Opus Dei make up, its basis and its meaning.

To his credit, however, Allen has done an immense amount of investigative work to document the first-hand point of view that he presents in his book. The stories from Kenya, Peru, Japan, and Chicago greatly enrich his narrative, and confront the reader with perspectives that are left out of polemical headlines. Furthermore, one always has the impression that he is sincerely engaged with his subject-matter, striving to avoid the easy short-cut of clichéd stereotypes. The presentation of the material itself is judiciously made, and can be helpful for a first-time reader on the subject.

Section one provides a quick, yet insightful overview of Opus Dei’s spirit and structure, with thoughtful reflections on why both are periodically misunderstood and maligned. His second section contains four chapters dedicated to sketching the central elements of Opus Dei’s spirituality. In the main his intermingling of interviews with theological considerations is illustrative, although at times the desire to be “objective” seems to force him into finding critical objections that appear more theoretical than real (Consider chapter six: does a Christian really need to be worried about the “risks” of considering him or herself a child of God?). With an abundance of data, the third section takes on the most common accusations leveled against Opus Dei. Here Allen’s journalistic instinct is at its best, going beyond facile judgements and showing complexities. Personally I found that Allen repeatedly demonstrates a generous spirit in these chapters: he does not play to moralizing tendencies, and appreciates without cynicism how supernatural realities and human limitations really do coexist. In his final chapter, Allen provides a generally positive assessment of Opus Dei, setting forth his own personal suggestions for how he would better things.

Whatever one’s opinion of the work as a whole and Allen’s understanding of various aspects of Opus Dei’s spirituality, it is fair to say that he has followed through on what he set out to do, and has given us a finely written book that any future journalist or writer on Opus Dei must measure herself by.

Justin Gillespie