

A Look at Opus Dei

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WHAT IS THE MEANING of all the criticism leveled in the world press at something called the secular institute of Opus Dei? What is Opus Dei? What is a secular institute? If Opus Dei's aims are good, why is it consistently portrayed as something sinister?

A "secular institute," for those still unacquainted with the term, is a society or congregation of men or women who dedicate themselves and their lives to the highest ideals of the gospel. They pronounce private vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. However, they live and work, not in a convent or monastery, but in a secular environment like all other lay people. They wear no distinctive garb. They hold positions in business, industry or the professions just as other lay persons do, and hence are quite indistinguishable from them. Their institutes are called "secular" to distinguish them canonically from "religious" congregations of priests, brothers and nuns. In brief, they are *lay persons* living dedicated lives in the *secular* world.

Secular institute members make no public fuss over the life of dedication which they have adopted. Generally, they follow a practice of discretion, even of secrecy, in speaking of their adherence to their institutes.

There are many such organizations in the Church of the 20th century. All have sprung up within the last thirty years, in answer to the peculiar apostolic needs of our time. A special document of Pope Pius XII—called an apostolic constitution, and designated *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, the first Latin words of the document—formally and fully approved this way of life in 1947 for those Catholics who are judged qualified to adopt it. In other words, no matter what anyone may think of the idea and the ideals of this still-novel kind of pursuit of Christian perfection, the Catholic Church has blessed it.

The much discussed organization known as Opus Dei cannot be understood except against the above background. Founded in Madrid in 1928 by Msgr. José María Escrivá de Balaguer, it was the first of the secular institutes. In the slightly more than three decades of its existence, it has spread rapidly through thirty countries, and is especially influential in academic circles. In Rome one hears of a large number of young laymen, members of Opus Dei, who are studying philosophy and theology there. Relatively few of these men are ever ordained to the priesthood. (The study of

FR. DAVIS, S.J., after several visits to Spain, here examines an organization that has recently been the object of much discussion in Spain and elsewhere.

theology is meant to provide a broad basis for their other scientific studies.) It is commonly said that only about two per cent of the membership of Opus Dei are priests; priests are ordained only as they are needed to care for the sacramental life of the members. There is a separate branch of Opus Dei for women.

What is Opus Dei and why does it exist? It is a society of Catholic men and women, predominantly persons in the lay state, who live dedicated lives in such secular callings as medicine, the arts, teaching, publishing, business and the like. Opus Dei is simply the sum of its members. It is the ecclesiastically approved way of life that binds them and all the phases of their work together. Thus, the specific objective of Opus Dei, its precise apostolate, is nothing other than the conglomerate apostolic activity of its adherents, each of whom pursues—in his own way and by the means available to him—a common ideal of working for the re-Christianization of society.

Due to its origins there, Opus Dei has grown most vigorously in Spain, and has come to be identified in the popular mind with Spain and Spanish Catholicism. There is an Opus Dei group in England at Oxford University. In the United States both Harvard University and the University of Chicago have small Opus Dei centers close to the campus.

How large is the membership of Opus Dei? This question can be answered only with a conjecture, since Opus Dei members are slow to speak about the size or rate of growth of their organization. Since one of the characteristics of this secular institute is the "discretion" of the members, a principle on which stress is laid in Opus Dei literature, one learns not to ask for detailed statistical information, and not to receive it when such questions are asked. However, it seems safe to say that the numerical strength of Opus Dei is centered largely in Spain, though it would be impossible to guess whether membership there is nearer to 5,000, 10,000 or 50,000. Certainly, so far as England and the United States are concerned, Opus Dei has very few members. I have no way of knowing what the situation may be in Latin America.

Several years ago, during a spell of severe press publicity about Opus Dei, I asked a minor official of the organization in Chicago whether AMERICA—or the Catholic press in general through the NC News Service—might not profitably publish Opus Dei's own version of the facts in question. I was told that it was not customary for Opus Dei to conduct its affairs in this way. In other words, it did not contemplate the establishment of anything resembling the standard American institu-

tion of a public information office. I was given to understand that Opus Dei, as an organization, has no policies or platforms of its own. Its work was said to be simply the work of each individual member, who goes about his private affairs in the walk of life to which his profession or his employment takes him.

In the summer of 1958, traveling in Spain and Italy, I again made the same inquiries and received the same answer. On the specific question of the numerical strength of Opus Dei, I was explicitly told that Opus Dei did not make a practice of announcing the number of its members, and the following reason was given: "If our numbers are small, our work will be disregarded; if large, our influence will be exaggerated."

In his recently published *Spain and Defense of the West: Ally and Liability*, Arthur P. Whitaker reports:

One prominent member explained to me that Opus Dei is silent about its size, not from any policy of concealment, but simply because it is indifferent to numbers, neither knowing nor caring how many members it has.

In Spain, although the major effort of Opus Dei has been in the Spanish university world (Opus Dei also maintains a special university of its own, the *Estudio General de Navarra*, at Pamplona), its influence extends into banking, publishing and politics. Since the Cabinet reorganization of February, 1957, the Minister of Commerce and the Minister of Finance have both been members of Opus Dei. Certain other Cabinet officials are said to be sympathizers. This commonly known prominence of certain Opus Dei members on the highest levels of the Spanish government has given the institute a definite political coloration, at least in the popular mind. Opus Dei considers this quite regrettable, and wants to correct what it deems a faulty image of itself. Thus far, its efforts to clarify its position have not been successful.

IN SPAIN, where rumor and gossip are unable to be checked by a free press, resentment against the supposed power of Opus Dei in political circles has of recent years been on the increase. Privately, the organization disclaims political aims of any sort. Publicly, however, it says little or nothing, thus following its counsel of "discretion." In the popular mind the result is wild conjecture, inevitable exaggeration of whatever influence Opus Dei may have, and misinterpretation of what that influence may signify. Typical of the confused state of public opinion on this subject was the remark made to me last summer by an intelligent and talkative Madrileño: Opus Dei, he asserted, is "the creature of the Jesuits." The truth, of course, is that Opus Dei and the Society of Jesus are completely distinct organizations. Ironically, quite a different strain of popular comment has it that the two are very much at dagger points.

Is Opus Dei a "secret society," a sort of "white Freemasonry," an organization of "undercover men"? The answer is No. Yet this is how Opus Dei is frequently described in the secular press. Despite all its "discretion," Opus Dei procedures do not correspond to the

caricatures of those who lampoon its alleged secrecy as sinister and dangerous. In Madrid, in Cambridge, Mass., in Chicago or at Oxford it is public knowledge that houses of Opus Dei members exist and their addresses are known. Opus Dei publications in Spain are easily identifiable. The consistent reluctance of the organization to answer publicly the charges made against it, or its refusal to publish bulletins about itself or to reveal the number of its members, are policies followed by many voluntary organizations, policies which in other cases occasion no criticism whatever.

Is there an Opus Dei political "party line," especially in Spain? Again it would seem that there is no such policy. Despite the immense publicity given to the fact that several prominent members of Opus Dei are connected with the government of General Franco, it would in my opinion be misreading the clear facts to conclude that the present regime in Spain has the unqualified support of Opus Dei as a group, or even of a majority of its members. The question of the political alignment of Opus Dei was answered once and for all by the authoritative pen of one of its most prominent members in Spain, Rafael Calvo Serer. He published a statement in *Le Monde* in Paris, issue of May 4, 1958, in which he said:

Opus Dei is not a social caste, nor a group of aristocrats or monarchists, nor a coterie of intellectuals. . . . Each member is absolutely free to think and act on the political level according to his personal convictions. Just as the mentality and the formation of some differ from those of others, so will their convictions be decidedly different, since they correspond to the problems of the diverse social contexts in which they work.

The much respected Sr. Calvo Serer, unquestionably one of the intellectual leaders of Opus Dei in Spain, makes no secret of his opposition to the regime of General Franco. Professor Whitaker, whose knowledgeable book deals at some length with Opus Dei, refers to Calvo Serer as "a tireless critic of the regime Opus Dei is said to dominate."

Again, in an article in the March-April, 1960 issue of an Opus Dei publication in Rome called *Studi Cattolici*, José Luis Illanes is at great pains to demonstrate that Opus Dei is no more to be linked with the present regime in Spain than are such other organizations as Catholic Action, the National Association of Catholic Propagandists, the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin, etc., members of which have also been active in government circles. Catholics, he says, are free to take whatever political positions they think proper, and Opus Dei members share this freedom. In one of the footnotes to this article, Sr. Illanes cites a document issued by officials of Opus Dei in Spain, explicitly and formally affirming the complete freedom of each member of Opus Dei in the field of his social and political opinions and activities. It declared that "Opus Dei expressly disavows any group or individual who makes use of the Institute in connection with his political activities." This document was published in Madrid newspapers on July 12, 1957. In view of this evidence and these

official disclaimers, it is inaccurate to insist that Opus Dei as a group supports the Franco regime.

Much that has been published in the United States concerning Opus Dei reveals a lack of information concerning the organization. For example, in the October, 1958 issue of *Nieman Reports*, discussing press censorship in Spain, Peter Sand (pseudonym) wrote: "The present Minister of Information is Arlas [sic] Salgado. Salgado is a member of Opus Dei, a secret lay Catholic organization." The reference is to the Spanish Minister of Information and Tourism, Gabriel Arias Salgado. By identifying Sr. Arias Salgado with Spanish press censorship, and by calling him a member of Opus Dei, Mr. Sand evoked one of the rare rebuttals issued publicly by Opus Dei. It came in the form of a letter, published in *Nieman Reports* for October, 1959, and signed by Very Rev. Ignatius Gramunt, counselor for Opus Dei members in Washington, D.C. Fr. Gramunt asserted that Sr. Arias Salgado neither belongs now nor ever did belong to Opus Dei. And he went on to remark:

Moreover, no member of the work [Opus Dei] participates in the management of the censorship of the press in that country. On the contrary, various members of the Institute have suffered the consequences of this censorship. Among them, the editor of *Diario Regional* of Valladolid, who a few months ago was forced to give up his position, a fact that was reported outside of Spain at that time.

Are the Jesuits, in Spain or elsewhere, inimical to Opus Dei? It can be stated unequivocally and on the highest authority that there is no such enmity. So far as the Society of Jesus is concerned, it not only recognizes the approved ecclesiastical status of Opus Dei, but regards the idealism of its members, and the spreading scope of its work, as products of divine Providence, ever watchful to create for each succeeding age the precise forms of the apostolate most suited to the needs of that age. If individual Jesuits, in Spain or elsewhere, have spoken critically of certain phases of Opus Dei activities, they were expressing private opinions.

NEVERTHELESS, CRITICISM such as Opus Dei has undergone must not be too readily discounted. The work of Opus Dei, especially in Spain, has borne the brunt of much loose talk. It would be foolish to deny that such criticism exists or that it exists in sufficient volume to merit consideration and counter-measures.

Recently, at Oxford University, Opus Dei unconsciously stirred up a storm of severe criticism in the pages of the *London Spectator*. The details of the incident in question—the purchase of a house for Afro-Asian students at the university—need not detain us here. The *Catholic Herald* of London, in its issue of February 10, defended Opus Dei, but went on to remark that it "seems clear that Opus Dei, in its apostolic work, especially in university circles, could sometimes study with more care the habits and customs, whether ecclesiastical or secular, of other countries in the pursuit of its excellent spiritual aims."

There has been some criticism of Opus Dei at Harvard University and at the University of Chicago. The grounds for this criticism are apparently very flimsy, being based for the most part on objections to its supposed clandestinity. However, it would be well for the organization to take these objections seriously into account. Again to quote the *Catholic Herald*, "work and behavior suited to Spain and Spanish Catholicism may well be unsuited both to Catholics and non-Catholics in this country. . . ." What goes for England, goes for the United States, and may well go, too, for Spain itself.

In summary, Opus Dei appears to have a sizable public relations problem on its hands. This problem is particularly acute in Spain, where its objectives have been seriously misunderstood by many, and where rumor and gossip may not be readily corrected under the prevailing conditions of a controlled press. The organization's own penchant for silence in the face of criticism only complicates the problem. Caricatures, misrepresentations and open calumnies against any organization should be answered immediately and fully. Opus Dei owes it to itself to straighten out the record whenever it judges its members or their activities to have been misrepresented. When it fails to do so, it jeopardizes not only its own high ideals and the effectiveness of its own apostolate, but also occasions a carry-over of unjust criticism against other secular institutes and the apostolic work they carry on.

Value of Secular Institutes

The first institutes gave a good account of themselves. They proved conclusively by their work and deeds that, favored by this exceptional vocation from God and the help of divine grace, they could achieve even in the world not only an inward but an outward consecration to the Lord. . . .

As time went by and these institutes grew in number, it became increasingly clear in how many ways they could be turned to the effective support of the Church and of souls. They could well be applied to the earnest pursuit of perfection, at all times and places. Many for whom the normal religious life was not possible could join such institutes. Through their daily contact with family life, professional circles and civil society, those whose lives were dedicated to sanctification could leaven the whole. Their manifold apostolate and Christian ministry could be turned to good use where priests and religious were forbidden or could make no headway. But on the other hand experience had shown that dangers and difficulties had not been wanting; in fact, they had sometimes, even rather easily, beset this life of perfection.

Pope Pius XII, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, February 2, 1947

School Question: Stage Two

Charles M. Whelan

THE QUESTION of Federal aid to church schools has entered a second phase. The first was the debate whether church schools may constitutionally receive Federal funds. The second is whether the level of national education may constitutionally be raised through co-operation for specific purposes between the Government and church schools; and if so, under what forms and what restrictions. Closely associated with the new phase is the immensely important question whether the church-school issue should be separated from the public school issue, especially when the matter of Federal aid is put to a vote.

President Kennedy has expressed strong concern that the proponents of integration and of aid to church schools may defeat his education program. Such fear is well founded but somewhat disingenuous. The real forces threatening the defeat of Federal aid are the conservatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties. Mr. Kennedy knows that the hard core of opposition to his entire program comes from the general conservatism of Republicans towards costly new programs, and particularly from the deep fear of Southern Democrats that Federal aid means the end of segregation and of local control over the educational system. But this hard core of opposition, the President also knows, may prove insufficient to defeat his bills, unless enough liberal Democratic and Republican votes are swung by the integration and church-school issues. The President, therefore, is trying his best to divorce these two key issues from his main bill.

This raises a serious problem in political morality, both for the President and for those who are inclined to oppose it with qualifications about its present form.

The President's problem is whether the need of public elementary and secondary schools is so great as to justify permissive assistance to segregated schools and unintended but serious disadvantages for private and church schools. The President has persuasively argued the gravity of the needs of public schools, especially on the secondary level. So far as co-operation with segregated schools is concerned, he seems willing to permit this if he cannot stop it, but he is hopeful that through an executive order or the normal judicial processes of

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desegregation, the evil will be limited and temporary. With respect to church schools, the President's reading of the *Everson* case would seem to have settled the issue of political morality in this area.

On their side, the champions of integration face a difficult moral judgment. Their position is all the more complicated because the denial of Federal aid will not speed integration. What they seek to do is to use the power of the purse to accelerate desegregation. By offering the States money in exchange for compliance with the Constitution, they hope to force a hard bargain. On the other hand, they foresee a threat to the current pace of integration if Federal funds are given to the States without a desegregation clause. Above all, they see this threat in a grant of Federal funds for private and church schools, with no strings attached. As a result, the two camps of qualified opponents to Mr. Kennedy's program find themselves in mutual opposition. The only point on which they agree is that neither will be hurt if Federal aid to education is denied to everyone.

Moreover, the threatened union of integrationists and Catholics with the general opponents of Mr. Kennedy's program results in a paradox and a tragedy. The paradox is that the integrationists find themselves united with the segregationists. The tragedy is that the Catholics find themselves in the same predicament. There are some bedfellows that even politics cannot make welcome.

This unhappy alliance highlights the moral choice that confronts advocates of limited co-operation with church schools. May they push their claim to the point where, if defeated, they will join in an attempt to defeat in turn any aid to public schools? May such an alliance be formed, even if public schools genuinely need Federal funds?

The needs of public schools are, of course, a question wholly independent of the constitutionality of limited co-operation with church schools. But they are not independent of the desirability and practical necessity of such co-operation.

As the American bishops recognized in the first point of their public statement, the need for Federal aid must be determined on the basis of objective, economic facts. The problems of public education are wholly a factual matter and must be determined without regard to religious or racial affiliation. Elsewhere (AM. 3/11, pp. 758-760) I have suggested that President Kennedy's constitutional vision may be affected by political con-