makes it an extremely important contribution to debates on our national origins, which all serious students of the founding and of liberalism will have to confront.

God's Work

OPUS DEI: LEADERSHIP AND VISION IN TODAY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH. By VITTORIO MESSORI. *Regnery. 201 pp. $27.50.*

BEYOND THE THRESHOLD: A LIFE IN OPUS DEI. By MARIA DEL CARMEN TAPIA. *Continuum. 364 pp. $29.95.*

Reviewed by **Robert Royal**

FIRST, a necessary disclaimer: the present writer has been invited to attend Opus Dei conferences, has spoken at events organized by people in the Work (as it is called by members), and has even made a retreat under the prelature's auspices. In my experience, the activities of Opus Dei are better organized, more unobtrusively hospitable, and more clearly thought through than are those of any other organization, religious or secular, known to me. In a church that lately has often mistaken incoherence for simplicity and disorder for spontaneity, Opus Dei breathes a refreshingly competent spirit. The Work, quite clearly, works.

But what does it work at? Primarily, I would say, at developing the spiritual life of those it touches. A few members of Opus Dei have in my presence shown a hint of a cult of personality toward its founder, the now Blessed Josémaria Escrivá de Balaguer. But for the most part, Opus Dei members seem to me as healthy, non-fanatical, and ordinary as any average group of Catholics who take their spiritual lives seriously. The young people in particular seem both happy and happy to have found a solidly Catholic group that encourages them to live good lives in the world of today.

I mention these personal impressions only because these two new books on the Work—one favorable, the other very much not—are themselves personal evaluations of experience with Opus Dei.

ROBERT ROYAL *is Vice President of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.*

NOTHING ATTRACTS CRITICISM like success. In the seventy years since its founding, the Work has grown to almost eighty thousand members, over half in Europe, another third in the Americas, and the rest scattered throughout the world. As Vittorio Messori notes, this movement, which was once thought of as a pre-Vatican II fossil by progressives, has not only survived the heyday of progressive Catholic movements, but continues growing while the left in general, religious and lay, is shrinking.

In addition, Opus Dei is a predominantly lay movement (the number of priests, about two thousand, is kept at a certain ratio to nonclerical members) dedicated to sanctifying people's lives in the midst of their everyday work and responsibilities. That used to be the cry of the progressives themselves. Now that someone has actually succeeded at it—albeit without accepting the progressive religious and social ideology lay movements were supposed to bring with them—the progressives themselves speak darkly of a parallel church that bypasses the local bishops (a false charge), of cult-like brainwashing of young people (to judge by the young people in Opus Dei centers here in America, equally false), and of a sinister right-wing political and economic conspiracy global in its reach (if true, a miserable failure given the current dearth of right-wing regimes on every continent).

Opus Dei came into the world at an unpropitious moment. The memoirs of those who traveled with Monsignor Escrivá as he was hunted by antireligious forces during the Spanish Civil War have a Hemingwayesque quality. At one point, the republicans caught a man they mistakenly thought was the good monsignor and strung up the poor fellow in front of the house of Escrivá's mother. Under the circumstances, the movement might have emerged from the Civil War embittered about secular democracy and committed to restoration and reaction. That it did not, and kept instead as its main mission equipping people spiritually to live in the modern world, is almost wholly ignored by critics.

WHAT HAPPENS in the Church always has repercussions in the world, and vice versa. It seems that the world perpetually feels the need for a sinister Catholic entity towards which it can direct its more general anti-Catholicism. The Jesuits in their heyday did nicely for that purpose. Now that they have, for the most part, become hard to distinguish from the Zeitgeist, it was probably inevitable that another Catholic scapegoat be found. Spanish in origin, ambitious in its disciplines, unusual in its organization, above all successful, and clearly destined to play a major role in the future of the Church, Opus Dei was a perfect candidate for the honor.

Even the great twentieth-century theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar seems to have been taken in briefly, and characterized the Work as "integrist," i.e., as seeking to impose the spiritual through nonspiritual (read political) means. Von Balthasar later repented, saying that he didn't know any Opus Dei members when he wrote the criticism, and refrained from speaking about Opus Dei for the rest of his life. Members of the Work have challenged critics to point to one political pronouncement by the institution in favor of right-wing or reactionary politics—or any political position at all, something strictly forbidden by their rules. In the current culture wars, Opus Dei's orthodox Catholicism of course orients its members toward predictable positions on many moral questions. But Opus Dei members seem to be able to balance those religious commitments with a variety of political views. If fully appreciated, that fact might go a long way towards explaining this potent lay movement. It suggests that the nature and success of the movement cannot be comprehended in conventional ideological categories.

Under the circumstances, it is unfortunate that neither of the books under review is likely to do much for a less ideological understanding of this remarkable movement. Vittorio Messori is a best-selling Italian journalist who put the questions to John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger that resulted, respectively, in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* and *The Ratzinger Report.* An admirer of both men, Messori also admires the orthodox faith and rigorous practice of Opus Dei. But he began this book, he says, as a journalist, knowing little about the subject, and intending to write a journalistic account of a year spent with Opus Dei members based on "facts, not impressions." He lucidly

explains a good deal about the internal workings of Opus Dei and the mistaken notions even many "good Catholics" have formed of this new form of religious organization, the personal prelature. But as was evident in the Ratzinger and papal books, Messori writes in an elliptical, European style that does not always translate well into English. Readers already familiar with the controversies about Opus Dei, however, will be informed and enlightened by Messori's dispassionate reflections on those controversies and his explanations of how Opus Dei actually functions.

MARIA DEL CARMEN TAPIA, on the other hand, joined the Work in Spain at an early age in 1948 and rose through the ranks over eighteen years. She spent six years working in Rome with Opus Dei's founder, Monsignor Escrivá, who then appointed her to direct the women's branch in Venezuela, where she stayed for ten years, from 1955 to 1965. There the story becomes complicated. Opus Dei claims she had created a cult of personality of her own in Caracas and has hinted that some sexual scandal also took place. Tapia claims that she was lured back to Rome on false pretenses, held incommunicado against her will, and forced to resign though never directly charged with anything or given a chance to reply to allegations. Shocked in particular at what she describes as Monsignor Escrivá's harshness and lack of charity toward her, she says that it was only after she returned to her family that she realized she had over the years been turned into a "fanatic" by classic brainwashing techniques. She admits to writing this memoir partly for its therapeutic value. And though she states that there are no lurid financial, sexual, or other scandals to be revealed, the main thrust of her book is to argue that the now beatified founder "was not an example of holiness, nor was he a model to be imitated by the women and men of our time." Indeed, she goes so far as to claim that the elderly leader was mentally ill at the time she returned to Rome from Venezuela.

It is difficult for an outsider to know what to make of these charges. Tapia does seem to have suffered some unfair treatment, and the Work has not helped itself by its subsequent explanations. For example, when Tapia resigned and went home to Spain, the government of Opus Dei in Rome refused to give her back her Venezuelan identity card and driver's license. (Tapia had become a Venezuelan citizen during her time in that country.) Opus Dei claimed, in a statement in reply to Tapia's book, that it took this "extraordinary" step because it could not in good conscience allow Tapia to return to Venezuela and cause more mischief. Perhaps so, but it is hard to see how a religious institute may legally and morally refuse an adult member her own official documents. Opus Dei also seems to have refused to acknowledge the truth that Tapia had studied philosophy and theology in Venezuela when she requested records in order to be able to continue graduate work in the United States. Those items, combined with threats to reveal personal behavior if Tapia publicly criticized the Work, do not paint a flattering portrait of some leaders in the central government in Rome at the time, perhaps including Monsignor Escrivá.

But Tapia weakens her case against the abuses that occurred from October 1965 to May 1966, the period between her return from Venezuela and her resignation from the Work, by retrospectively recasting her nearly twenty previous years as participation in a "Catholic sect." Those who have seen real sects at work would find it hard to place Opus Dei among them. Tapia's own latter-day fanaticism shows through here. She criticizes rigorous practices in the 1940s and 1950s, then concedes that many have been changed since her period of formation. In fact, the various reasonable adjustments that took place in ways of dress, practice, and policy—some at Tapia's own suggestion—would not likely have occurred were Opus Dei only a band of rigid sectarians. Tapia cites—rather woodenly—from some of the literature on sects to argue that this or that aspect of the Work's activities reveals its sectarian nature. Of course, a great deal of religious practice, whether Catholic, Protestant, or non-Christian, can be categorized in that way as well.

TAPIA'S ANGRY DEBUNKING of Escrivá seems to assume that truly holy people must be without flaws, this despite the history of the saints from Peter and Paul down to the present. Her anger also leads her to turn every detail about Opus Dei in a sinister direction. Young members may be told, for example, that parents can become an obstacle to a vocation. In the normal course of things, one hopes they will not be. But the history of no less a figure than Saint Thomas Aquinas suggests that parental interference may sometimes have to be vigorously resisted for a true vocation. Even Jesus himself warned us we need to "hate" father and mother to become disciples. Tapia's animus toward Opus Dei is so extreme as to lead her to suggest, quite absurdly, that Amnesty International should turn its attention to the work of the Work.

Her description of her own experience contains several anomalies. By her telling, she was held a virtual prisoner—without money or access to the outside world—in the Opus Dei residence in Rome over several months before she resigned. Yet she managed—by using Opus Dei servants, she says—to rent a post-office box and send and receive letters from Venezuela. It is difficult to see how both these elements in her story could be true. The charges against her originated in Venezuela, yet other than the "misogyny" of the priest in charge there and the envy of other female members of the Work, Tapia seems to have no explanation for why she found herself in hot water. Since the charges would have had to be confirmed by several people, one is left with competing explanations for her plight: a broad conspiracy against her or a serious problem on her side to which she is blind.

Tapia's skills as a writer are not great and the whole book suffers from a glut of details without a coherent narrative to make sense of them. Her severe judgment against Opus Dei seems disproportionate to her experience within it—eighteen years of apparently satisfying work compared with six months of possibly mistaken treatment by superiors. Whatever mistreatment may have been doled out to Tapia, any picture of Opus Dei that leaves out the highly successful efforts it has made at forming consciences, spiritual direction, and meeting people's spiritual needs in the midst of their everyday lives has not really addressed the subject.

BRIEFLY NOTED

THE GIRARD READER. Edited by JAMES G. WILLIAMS. *Crossroad/Herder. 310 pp. $39.95 cloth, $19.95 paper.*

It is entirely possible that René Girard is one of the most important Christian thinkers now alive. It is certain that he is one of the most fascinating. In a biographical interview he gave in 1995, Girard declared that all the work he has done over the last three decades was present in his mind even in the late 1950s—as a "dense intuition," a "block" to be penetrated little by little. It is possible for readers to see that now in the torrent of books, articles, and interviews he has produced. His work began to appear in the early 1960s with widely acclaimed expositions of the way triangular relations form among characters in novels, particularly in Dostoevsky. He then moved to anthropology, holding that culture is invariably based on sacrificial violence against a scapegoat. The connection came with his increasing study of psychology and his argument that desire is "mimetic"—that we learn what it is we want by watching what others want. And when at last he turned to explicit Christian theology, he found, bit by bit, the solution: At the center of his thought lies the Cross, the Sacrifice that breaks the cycle of violence, sacrifice, and mimetic desire. But the problem with discerning the unity of Girard's thought was always that different audiences were reading different books from him: literary critics reading one set, anthropologists another, and theologians yet another. That's exactly what makes *The Girard Reader*, James G. Williams' new collection of essays and chapters from Girard, so helpful. Arranged topically rather than chronologically, the book lays out Girard's completed thought and allows the reader to make out the unity of all that the man has done since he first sat down in 1959 to penetrate that dense, complex, and fascinating intuition.

— J. Bottum

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF MODERN BIOLOGY: FROM SOCIAL DARWINISM TO SOCIOBIOLOGY. By HOWARD L. KAYE. With a new epilogue by the author. *Transaction. 208 pp. $19.95 paper.*

Evolutionary psychology (an updated form of sociobiology) is a rapidly growing field, and has spilled over into the popular press through articles on the adaptive benefits of such things as infanticide. All of which makes this a propitious time for the republication of Howard Kaye's incisive philosophical critique of sociobiology, first published ten years ago. Sociobiology is a secularized form of natural theology, Kaye explains: an attempt to "translat[e] our lives and