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## OPUS DEI—A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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Marlies Kucking

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*This is an account, by Ms C. O'Shea, editor of the Spanish women's magazine Telva, of an interview given her by Marlies Kucking, the central secretary of Opus Dei in Rome.*

*Viale Bruno Buozzi, Rome, 1992.*

I have come to the headquarters of Opus Dei. Here, in the crypt of the Prelatic church of the Work, Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer is buried. He was beatified on 17 May in St Peter's Square. A saintly man who saw, 62 years ago on 14 February 1930, that there was a place for women in the Work which he had founded in 1928. But what was that place? How did he see the role of women in an institution of the Church which did not fit into the usual moulds? What contribution can women make to society and to the Church? With those and a thousand other questions on my mind I asked for an interview with Marlies Kucking who heads the team that advises Bishop Alvaro del Portillo in his task of governing the women members of Opus Dei throughout the world.

Marlies Kucking, a German, welcomed me into her office, a functional room in which telephones and the computer screen contrast with flowers and the photographs of the first women members of the Work from different countries. She excused herself for being a few minutes late: 'You are more punctual than the Germans,' she said with a smile. 'As it is Sunday I went for a game of tennis; otherwise office work can be pretty stifling. I learnt from the Founder of the Opus Dei that you have to know how to rest to be fit and to be able to put more effort into your work afterwards. Whenever I can I go for a walk around the near-by Villa Borghese.'

Her day starts early, at 6 a.m. 'Before I start work in my office I spend some time doing housework, I pray and go to Mass; after breakfast I look through the newspapers, read the mail and then get down to studying the memos and papers which reach my desk everyday. After lunch I share experiences and chat with other members of the Work in a family-like get-together, and in the afternoon I spend several more hours in my office and at meetings—from time to time with Mgr. del Portillo. Although it seems

otherwise, every day is very different and varied. Recently we have been working on the preparations for the beatification of the Founder, as well as giving the usual encouragement to our world-wide apostolates.'

### **First contacts**

*Q. As far as I understand, you worked closely with Mgr. Escrivá from 1964 until his death in 1975, but how and where did you first come in contact with Opus Dei?*

A. Here in Rome, in October 1954, on a study trip organized by my school. One of the teachers who came with us invited me to meet some of her friends in the Work in this very house. It was the first I had heard of Opus Dei. I had been brought up in a Catholic family and educated in a school run by nuns. That afternoon I was surprised to see a group of normal everyday women from a number of different countries trying to live a life of commitment to God in the middle of the world.

*Q. But then you were only a teenager, how could you decide at such an early age to take such a serious step as joining Opus Dei? Frankly you are the typical example of those 16-year-olds who are 'brainwashed' in a few hours. . . .*

A. Obviously if I had been 'brainwashed' I would have realised it sooner or later; besides anyone who lets themselves be influenced in such an important decision must be empty-headed. Personally I realised that Opus Dei was for me, but I remained at home with my parents and did not actually join until two years later, in the first women's centre in Cologne, when I was 18.

### **How much freedom?**

*Q. Nevertheless, taking such a decision can be dangerous because at that age one's character still is not formed, one is unaware of other possible avenues in life and one has limited experience.*

A. Let me insist that those of us already in Opus Dei are vitally interested in only having people admitted who have a real vocation. No one comes or is kept here by force. During the 1960s, Blessed Josemaría encouraged us to be more active in developing among secondary school students a sense of their human and Christian vocation. He felt the need to form many responsible Christians who had clear ideas and were able to take a stand against

tendencies, ideologies and opinions which they knew went against their own faith convictions.

*Q. Yet there are parents who are worried at the thought of their children being 'fished'. Are people who approach Opus Dei really free?*

A. Parents want their children to be upright, honourable and contented people. That is also the aim of the clubs and cultural centres we run for young people. Parents know that and if they choose to allow their children to attend those clubs or schools it is because they know they provide good education and good formation. What is at stake here is the meaning of personal freedom. The greatest freedom we have is to do what is right and good, for this is what leads to true happiness on earth. The formation we give young people helps them see that living a Christian life—loving God and loving others—demands commitment and at the same time is a source of genuine happiness.

*Q. Are you sure that there is real freedom among the members of the Work?*

A. You know as well as I do that there is. We are all here because we want to be. What kind of cage would be needed to lock up thousands of people who have such different jobs and come from such different social backgrounds? The vast majority of Opus Dei members do not live in centres of the Work; they come and go as they please. They are not held down by force nor were they coerced into asking for admission. A person who can be easily coerced in some way lacks even the basic human conditions required to persevere. We are here because we want to be and that is the most supernatural reason, as I have heard the Founder say so many times. In other words, with the grace of God and freely, we want to be faithful to our vocation.

#### **A man who knew how to love**

*Q. Let us go back to something more personal. Did you meet Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer in 1954?*

A. No, it was later, in 1957, during one of his visits to Germany. From the first moment I saw him as a real father. Little by little I realised—especially after I came to Rome—that I was learning the spirit of the Work directly from the Founder. He considered himself as said so often, 'a poor sinner who loved Jesus Christ.' But at the same time he was conscious that God had called him to

do Opus Dei; he knew it was not his own invention but rather a work of God in which we are all called to be instruments.

*Q. You are a reliable witness to the life of Mgr. Escrivá because you have worked closely with him for years. Did you have the impression that you were working with a saint?*

A. Yes. I always saw clearly that he was a saintly priest. I would say that what stood out was his daily, quite tangible, self-giving. I do not remember him ever saying 'no' to something God was asking of him. If I had to sum up his life I would say that he was a man who really knew how to love, with a catholic heart. First he loved God. His life of piety was striking; with great naturalness he prayed and got others to pray. When faced with hard and difficult undertakings he would turn to God with unlimited love. He had recourse to prayer, as 'Opus Dei's only weapon'. And with that same love, with that great heart, he loved every one of us. He was attentive to people at every moment, whether he was tired or not, whether his health was good or not so good, always. We all have our good days and our not so good days, but to live such a spirit of self-giving, day after day, is the mark of a saint.

#### **Supernatural and common sense**

*Q. What do you consider to be the most outstanding feature of the Founder of Opus Dei?*

A. It is really difficult to say. I could point to many sides of his character but perhaps what will give him a place in the history of the Church is his having placed everyday living and especially work in the ambit of holiness. That is to say, he opened horizons of true Christianity for all people whatever their professional, social or family circumstances.

*Q. Sometimes when faced with a person of such calibre, there lurks the danger of blurring somewhat his human profile, his way of reacting in ordinary life. What kind of temperament did he have? I imagine he got angry or had other defects. I and many others would like to know if he was like we are and yet got where he is!*

A. Of course he had a dynamic personality and great strength of character. He used these qualities first of all to make demands on himself, and then on all his daughters and sons. Naturally that could be rather disconcerting at times. I think if God had not given him that strength he would have been unable to make any headway

with the Work, because from a human point of view it is an impossible enterprise.

*Q. How did he relate to other people?*

A. I can confirm, and I know from personal experience, that he let himself be guided by supernatural prudence and by great common sense. When he realized he had made a mistake in his dealings with someone he put it right and, if need be, did so publicly. Even in the case of a person who was not in Opus Dei he told them, in a kind and affectionate way, if something was wrong. I remember how in 1973 he was visited by the parents of one of the directors of the central government. Her mother told Mgr Escrivá that she was curious to meet someone who was stronger than she was, referring to the opposition she had shown to her daughter's vocation. The Father answered that it was God who had been the stronger one, not he. He also told that lady and her husband that they were 'responsible' for their daughter's vocation because they had given her a Christian upbringing and so God had found fertile ground in her. Next day, Mgr. Escrivá saw that member of the Work and requested her to write to her mother, asking her to forgive him for having said things so forthrightly, but he was, he said, from Aragon and he liked to speak clearly. She was able to re-assure him afterwards that her mother had been very grateful for the Father's words.

#### **Trusting others to do the work**

*Q. Was it easy to work with the Founder? Did you dare disagree with him or have a different opinion?*

A. He was not hidebound by his own ideas although, on essential matters of the founding spirit, we were all very aware that he had a specific charism from God. I remember, for example, when I began to work in the central government of Opus Dei. I had plenty of good will but little experience; he trusted people like me and listened to our opinions in matters which he could have resolved so much faster and better on his own. His attitude was an encouragement for us to study things in depth and try to do them well. It was impressive to see how much he trusted us.

#### **Pray, forgive and clarify**

*Q. It is well known that Mgr. Escrivá de Balaguer was the butt of calumny, malignant gossip and misunderstanding. It happened*

*even in the run up to his beatification. How did he face up to all this? Did he suffer or did he just ignore it?*

A. As far as criticism is concerned, Blessed Josemaría reacted, as I mentioned before, as a man who knew how to love. I never heard him speak badly of anybody. He always insisted on praying and forgiving. He said he had not needed to learn to forgive because God had taught him to love. He put the record straight certainly, because justice demanded it. We must remember that Jesus Christ himself was misunderstood and criticized. So too has the Church.

*Q. As a German, what can you say about the Founder of the Work's position on Nazism? There have been rumours . . .*

A. Blessed Josemaría suffered on seeing any sort of injustice committed, not only towards Jews, but towards anyone. How could he possibly be thought to justify Hitler's genocide? It is so absurd, I can only say it is a calumny. In Opus Dei there are people of Jewish origin, including some who are converts. And a number of Jews have been active co-operators.

#### **At the fore of feminism**

*Q. You have been in contact with women from all over the world for many years now. Logically you have thought of the role of women in society: their problems, their worries, their needs. In 1967 Mgr. Escrivá gave Telva an interview on these questions. Have you anything to say on the matter?*

A. The Founder of the Work encouraged us to be honest, upright and strong women. He had total confidence in women's capacity, because, as he would often say, women have the duty 'to bring to the family, to civil society, and to the Church, something characteristic of their own which only they can give.' In this he is at one with the recent document of Pope John Paul II *Mulieris Dignitatem*, on the role of women in all fields of human activity. One must never lose sight of their equal dignity. Women do not have to imitate men in some superficial way; if they do they will lose something which is personal to them.

*Q. Are you a feminist?*

A. It all depends on what you understand by feminism. I uphold that women have the same rights as men since all of us are human beings and God's children, with all that that entails. We can and ought participate in cultural and professional life, and, indeed, in

all sectors of public and private life. I also think that where this fundamental equality still does not exist or has not been fully recognized, and where women live and work in dehumanizing conditions, everything possible should be done to remedy the situation.

*Q. What are women in Opus Dei doing to help eliminate the poverty, illiteracy and lack of opportunity for human development which women suffer? How close are they to the suffering and poverty of other women?*

A. Apart from what everyone in the Work does personally to alleviate any kind of marginalisation in the family, on the job and in society, we also provide medical, technical and educational programs. Women in the Prelature are involved in running literacy and cultural projects, medical dispensaries, primary and secondary schools, and third-level education institutions. In Peru, Bolivia and Mexico we have, for some years now, training schools for country people; there are secretarial, language and catering schools for women who live in working class city centres, like the Bronx, New York and in Rome. There are similar things being done in Kenya, the Philippines, Brazil, etc. We are by no means inactive!

#### Value of housework

*Q. Are there many women in Opus Dei whose time is taken up exclusively with housework?*

A. Most women in the Work are married, so it is normal that their family duties take up a large part of their time. But when they need the money or have the requisite training and the inclination they also work outside the home. The message of Opus Dei centres on the sanctification of ordinary work. House work has the same value as any other. Once Mgr. Escrivá was asked what job he thought was more important, that of a university tutor or a garbage collector. His answer was something like this: 'It depends who does it better and with greater love of God.'

*Q. Another assumption about married women in Opus Dei is that they are encouraged to have a lot of children.*

A. That is not true. The Work only reminds them of the traditional teaching of the Church which is reflected, for example, in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI, or in the Apostolic Brief *Familiaris Consortio* of John Paul II. Women of faith respect natural morality and the teaching of the Church. In the words of

the Founder of the Work: '[Men and women] should not block the sources of life.' When a woman gets married the normal thing is that she should try to have children.

#### **Autonomy for women**

*Q. How much autonomy do women in the Prelature have over internal government?*

A. Women in Opus Dei have the same autonomy in government as men do. I have heard the Founder say, hundreds of times, that he wanted us to run ourselves.

*Q. You are at the head of how many women?*

A. Life is more than statistics! But if you are interested, there are more than thirty-six thousand women in Opus Dei.

*Q. How do you select people for jobs within the Work?*

A. They need to have the necessary human and supernatural maturity to do the work. They all have a profession and in many cases they are actively engaged in that work as well. We try to have a mixture of people from different countries. Working in Rome, for example, there are women of eighteen different nationalities.

*Q. Among the top jobs is there the job of personal secretary to the Father? (The answer 'No' to this question is so direct that in order to continue the interview I needed to explain that I was sure the claims I had read were another colossal invention.)*

A. Neither Mgr. Escrivá, nor Mgr. del Portillo now, have ever had women personal secretaries; their secretaries were and are priests.

*Q. What does the work of the central government of the Work consist of? What do people plan and study in Rome?*

A. The apostolic initiatives for women: young people, professionals, married women; the task of forming the members of the Work; the study and encouragement of new apostolic activities; the opening of centres and the beginning of the Work in new countries. We give directives for the work from here but each country has complete autonomy. We do not interfere in the day-to-day planning of each place. Opus Dei adapts itself completely to each country. Things cannot be done in the same way in Portugal, Japan, the Cameroons or Sweden.



### **Towards the future**

*Q. What plans does Opus Dei have at the moment, especially in the light of the recent upheavals in Eastern Europe? I gather that you are studying Polish.*

A. Our immediate plans are to expand to new cities in countries where we are already working. Concerning Eastern Europe, we are just about to begin in Hungary and Czechoslovakia. We also have also contacts in Russia. We are looking into the possibility of starting in India and Indonesia.

*Q. I expect your workload increased in the months before the beatification of Mgr. Escrivá. Were you pleased with the number who came to Rome for 17 May?*

A. Yes, indeed. People made all sorts of sacrifices to get here. They had to raise the money and find the time — I know of many who used up all their vacation time. People from all over the world feel they owe a lot to Blessed Josemaria, because through his intercession, they or their family members or their friends have been granted important favours.

### **Some statistics about Opus Dei:**

Founded on 2 October 1928. The women's section on 14 February 1930;

More than 75 thousand people belong to the Work, including 36 thousand women;

In the central government there are women from 18 countries.

Priests in the Prelature: 1,400;

The Prelature works in 80 countries;

There are people in the Work from 87 different countries;

Universities: 7;

Centres for social promotion, medical dispensaries and rural schools for women: 108;

Printings of *The Way*: 250;

Languages in which published: 39;

Copies sold: 3,700,000;

Books of the Founder of Opus Dei sold: more than 6 million;

Languages in which the prayer card has been distributed: 47.