## Opus Dei in England: 1

# Saints in the office

#### ANNABEL MILLER

Ordinary Catholics tend to eye Opus Dei with suspicion. They may think of it as a secretive and reactionary church within the Church. In search of the facts on the ground, *The Tablet*'s former executive editor went to meet members in England.

S Marianne Law, 25, sat in a Westminster pub with a half-pint of lager, she stood out from the rest of the after-work crowd only by being unusually pretty, in a fresh-faced kind of way. But Marianne's way of life is extraordinary. When she told me, "I can't think of anyone I would rather give my life to", she was not talking about a boyfriend, but about God.

Marianne, a civil servant, became involved with Opus Dei at Sheffield University. On holiday, she joined an Opus Dei expedition to Poland to teach English. "They had something I did not have", she told me. "They were people who really lived out their faith. But they were also involved in ordinary things; they enjoyed life almost more than I did. They had a certain level of happiness, even when things went wrong."

She began to go to Mass more often, then heard "a clear call" from God to join Opus Dei. It felt, according to Marianne, like an invitation to an "amazing adventure". Now she is an Opus Dei numerary, living in the organisation's hostel for women in Ashwell House, Hackney, north-east London. Opus Dei numeraries are full members who commit themselves to celibacy. Full members who are married, or who wish to marry in the future, are called supernumeraries.

Marianne expects to make a lifetime commitment to Opus Dei in three years' time. "I have made a commitment to Jesus Christ as I would to someone I wanted to marry", she told me. "That relationship is very much present." There is a serenity about Marianne which made me see myself as rather jaded and cynical in comparison. She has a "normal" set of friends, she told me, not all of whom belong to Opus Dei. "But I've stopped drinking so much, and going out so much. The change has surprised people." She says the rosary on the Tube.

I had arranged to meet Marianne because I

wanted to find out more about the work of Opus Dei in England. I have always been fascinated by them, because if you nention Catholic company, you can almost guarantee that eye will roll. Opus Dei, which has its own prelate is widely regarded as a weird, secretive see which is out of step with the modern Catholic Church.

Yet Opus enjoys the support of the Pope and, in England and Wales, of Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor. Its priests are listed in the Catholic Directory, as are the hostels it runs for young people.

Who are the members of Opus Dei in England? Are they, to put it crudely, obsessive weirdos? Or are they misrepresented?

In Latin America, Opus Dei priests and bishops have been criticised for undoing the work begun by liberation theologians. In Iteland, members were accused of having had an unhealthy influence in politics and the law. In Rome, Opus Dei is said to be behind some hard-line Vatican statements such as that on the collaboration of the laity with priests and the ecumenical section of the doctrinal congregation's declaration *Dominum Iesus*.

To examine all these charges would take years of study in many countries. I could not attempt that, but I wanted to try to gain impression of the current work of Opus Dein England. Jack Valero, a numerary from Sperwho has lived in London for some years, took me to meet a family in St Albans. Teresa and Philip Crabtree have 10 children. Expecting to find myself on Walton's Holy Mountain, I was relieved to see the kids watching football on television in the kitchen and the odd stray toddler refusing to go to bed.

Teresa was brought up in a staunch Catholic family, and got to know Opus Dei when she was at university in London. A down-to-earth woman, she shows no sign of being oppressed by the demands of Opus. When I asked her how she coped with the daily spiritual requirements, she said: "If you don't manage it one day, don't worry. Maybe God wanted you to do something else then."

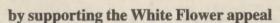
Her husband Philip was brought up in the Church of England, but became a Catholic when he left university, and followed Teresa into Opus Dei. As a couple, they are deeply involved in their local parish of St Alban and St Stephen, where Teresa gives catechism classes to local children who do not go to Catholic schools. As for her own children Teresa says: "The only thing I hope for is that they are good Catholics. I pray for them to become saints."

Her reference to "sainthood" was made without irony. Josemaría Escrivá encouraged his followers to aim for sainthood and the openly admit this. Their idea of sainthood not, however, to do with standing on a pedestal above the world; it is much more earthy than that. Philip told me, for example, about the challenge he faces at work in trying to avoid the usual gossipy office chat. "I just walk away", he said.

There are 84,000 members of Opus De worldwide, including 1,800 priests. Most are lay people who live and work in the world spreading the Gospel in the midst of things.

My appointed guide to the organisation, Jack Valero, was introduced to Opus Bei as child in Barcelona, because his father was 3

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wher. When he came to London as a stuthe stayed in one of Opus Dei's student Netherhall House, in a leafy corner of

Swes Cottage. Netherhall is still a major focus of the manisation's activity in England. Quiet and infortable, it is for men only, although comen can visit during the day. Opus Dei whedges that there is an evangelical behind its student hostels, but denies that those who live in them are put mder any pressure to become Catholics or in Opus Dei. Only half the residents at Metherhall are Catholic, and only 15 per cent are connected with Opus. The atmosphere is studious and somewhat clinical, but men the choose to spend their student years in a ingle-sex, Catholic-run hall of residence are mlikely to be the party type.

After finishing his studies, and doing a puple of jobs, Valero set up a software comwith a friend. He remembers that period an opportunity to "evangelise in the vanmard, meeting lots of people who were very ir from God and trying to talk to them about that it is to be a Christian". This may sound like an odd way to run a business, but the company did well and Valero made a lot of money, which allowed him to retire early. A fiendly man with a good sense of humour, he now works full-time for Opus Dei. He still remains a firm friend with his former business partner, who is not a member. Laughing, Valero told me: "He does not want any more from me until he is on his deathbed, and then

Opus Dei's special charism, Jack explains, sto demonstrate how the Christian life can be lived at work and through work. This, he grees, is not something that Opus Dei memas have a monopoly on, but they see it as conticular vocation.

he has agreed to convert."

But why do numeraries have to be celibate? Does this not indicate that Opus Dei has an decurrent of negativity towards the body and cauality? He disagreed. "Between two and three quarters of people in Opus Dei are married", he pointed out. He sees his melibacy as an opportunity to focus on the of God. The organisation takes pains to feguard the celibacy of numeraries like in; all retreats and recollections are menwomen-only (unlike the Catholic reliorders, whose male and female more work more and more closely

what is daily life like for the average ober of Opus? Before I began this project, magined shadowy gatherings in dark inches and regular private sessions of self-Ture. Such ideas make Valero laugh. Yes, freely admits, there is a tradition of physimortification", and the founder of Opus nous for beating himself until the walls of hathroom were spattered with blood. But, days, members have to ask permission ione they can beat themselves or wear the a scratchy band worn around the thigh. argues that the pain inflicted by the far less than that involved in a hard Mout at the gym. People don't have to do he says, and far too much fuss is made

mbers' ordinary activities are, however, inding in a different way. Each day, all indicated blioteca Virtual Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Opus Dei

members attend Mass, spend up to an hour in mental prayer, do 15 minutes of spiritual reading and say the rosary. They go to confession each week, attend weekly "circle" meetings and monthly recollections.

Curious, I went to Ealing, west London, for one of the women's recollection evenings. I was let into a huge house, set back from the road, which acts as a community home for



women members. In a beautiful chapel on the ground floor, a small group of various nationalities said the rosary, and listened while a meditation on marriage by Josemaría Escrivá was read out. There was then a short talk from a gentle-voiced priest of Opus Dei, and the evening ended with Benediction. The atmo-sphere was peaceful and prayerful.

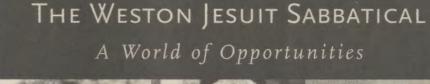
I was even more surprised when I visited Baytree, one of the social projects of Opus Dei. The Baytree Centre in Brixton, south London, is a place where women - many of them newly-arrived immigrants - can learn English, literacy and basic computer skills. It is backed by the Dawliffe Hall Educational Foundation, a charity inspired by Opus Dei, and is run by Mae Parreno, a Filipina mother of three.

The atmosphere at Baytree is boisterous and light-hearted. The centre also provides after-school activities for girls of school age drama, tap or ballet, and so on. Mae Parreno is an Opus Dei supernumerary, but the 25 staff of Baytree are from a variety of faiths.

She would deny that the centre aims to recruit new members for Opus Dei, but says its style and spirit are inspired by the teaching of Josemaría Escrivá, while both staff and beneficiaries know that the parent charity has a Christian orientation. The centre has good links with the local parish of Holy Rosary. She builds up friendships with some of the women who come to Baytree, and if that leads them to ask about her faith, she responds. But, she adds: "I am very conscious of respecting the freedom of other people. God has a plan for each person and I can't meddle with that

Mae Parreno, and the other members of Opus Dei whom I met, did not look like people who were living on another planet, trapped within a masochistic set of beliefs. But I knew there had to be another side to the story. So I went to meet some of those who had been unhappy within Opus Dei and who had left. Next week I will tell their stories.

(To be continued)





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