

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.

AS 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 mention Opus Dei in middle-of-the-road Catholic company, you can almost guarantee that eyes will roll. Opus Dei, which has its own prelate, is widely regarded as a weird, secretive sect 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 Ireland, 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 *Dominus 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 an impression of the current work of Opus Dei in England. Jack Valero, a numerary from Spain who 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 they openly admit this. Their idea of sainthood is 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 Dei 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 Dei as a child in Barcelona, because his father was a

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

Netherhall is still a major focus of the organisation's activity in England. Quiet and comfortable, it is for men only, although women can visit during the day. Opus Dei acknowledges that there is an evangelical intention behind its student hostels, but denies that those who live in them are put under any pressure to become Catholics or join Opus Dei. Only half the residents at Netherhall are Catholic, and only 15 per cent are connected with Opus. The atmosphere is very studious and somewhat clinical, but men who choose to spend their student years in a single-sex, Catholic-run hall of residence are unlikely to be the party type.

After finishing his studies, and doing a couple of jobs, Valero set up a software company with a friend. He remembers that period as an opportunity to "evangelise in the vanguard, meeting lots of people who were very far from God and trying to talk to them about what 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 friendly 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 he has agreed to convert."

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

But why do numeraries have to be celibate? Does this not indicate that Opus Dei has an undercurrent of negativity towards the body and sexuality? He disagreed. "Between two thirds and three quarters of people in Opus Dei are married", he pointed out. He sees his celibacy as an opportunity to focus on the love of God. The organisation takes pains to safeguard the celibacy of numeraries like men; all retreats and recollections are men-only or women-only (unlike the Catholic religious orders, whose male and female members work more and more closely together).

So what is daily life like for the average member of Opus? Before I began this project, I imagined shadowy gatherings in dark churches and regular private sessions of self-torture. Such ideas make Valero laugh. Yes, he freely admits, there is a tradition of physical mortification, and the founder of Opus Dei, the Blessed Josemaría Escrivá, was famous for beating himself until the walls of his bathroom were spattered with blood. But, these days, members have to ask permission before they can beat themselves or wear the traditional scratchy band worn around the thigh. Valero argues that the pain inflicted by the band is far less than that involved in a hard workout at the gym. People don't have to do it, he says, and far too much fuss is made about it.

Members' ordinary activities are, however, expanding in a different way. Each day, all

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 atmosphere 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 plan."

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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