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SPANISH FOUNDER OF OPUS DEI

From a Special Correspondent

Spain, the country of improvisation and sharp contrasts, shows her character in religion as in everything. Both the mysticism of St. John of the Cross and the militant spirit of St. Ignatius have their roots there. So too has a new religious phenomenon which may well have effects as far reaching as these: an organization known as Opus Dei. It originated with one young priest working with university students in the slums of Madrid just 30 years ago. It is now a large international organization in Rome where some 300 men, mostly post-graduates, go through a five-year course in philosophy and theology; training part of the *corps d'élite* of a body now numbering thousands and spread through four continents. Of this total about 3 per cent. are priests. The rest are mainly professional men. For every member, Opus Dei—doing the Lord's work—essentially consists in doing his own: the use of his station in life, function or responsibility as his own mode of dedication to the Christian ideal.

The founder and life-time president of Opus Dei is Mgr. Escrivá. Born in the little town of Barbastro in Aragon in 1902, he took a doctorate in Civil and Roman Law at the University of Zaragoza before going to the priesthood. He was ordained in 1925 and transferred to Madrid. Spain at the time was in political and social ferment. Fr. Escrivá



was able to see it at close quarters: religion relegated to the sacristy, the rising tide of anti-clericalism, the spread of Marxist and materialist views among workers and intellectuals alike. A handful of enlightened liberals could do little to bring in a new order on such treacherous quicksands, the rank-and-file conservative Catholics were patently fighting a losing battle, the militant right wing was learning violence from its enemies, as happens in all states of war.

In such an atmosphere the inspiration to found Opus Dei came to Fr. Escrivá, in 1928, when he was 26 years old. It was soon shared with a devoted band of university students, principally from the technical schools of medicine, engineering, and agriculture. There was no political or social programme, simply the decision to learn, as the primitive Christians did, how to live in and infiltrate a world largely pagan in its values. Mgr. Escrivá's first hostel in Madrid in 1935 was, of course, doomed by the Civil War. With his life in constant danger, he finally escaped across the Pyrenees, and later set to work regrouping the movement on the Nationalist side for an apostolate which he deemed no less necessary there than on the opposing side.

Immediately after the Civil War he published the little book *Camino* (The Way), which conveys the essence of his teaching. It came out without any special fanfare, but has in fact sold by the hundred thousand since then, in 30 different translations, including Croat, Rumanian, Arabic, and Japanese. It is not a book of rules or a methodical text book. Its thousand-minus-one apophthegms attempt no regimentation but seek to inspire personal reflection, judgment and initiative. The simplicity of the dove and the wisdom of the serpent seem to have gone into its compilation. Texts that may appear trite in translation and out of context, jostle with others of worldly wisdom or of true spiritual insight.

CHANGE IN STATUS

The movement grew in Spain as the little book began to find its way there. By now considerable encouragement was being received from the Ministry of Education. In 1941 the movement gained episcopal recognition in Madrid and was sanctioned as a diocesan activity by Rome in 1943. The world war had virtually confined its activities to one country, where its growth has been subject to local peculiarities, but in 1946 Mgr. Escrivá transferred his headquarters to Rome. From now on Opus Dei is to take on an international status and activity in the most varied fields. Close contact with university life remains a characteristic. A student hostel was opened in London five years ago; another will shortly be started in Oxford. And so it goes on in as many as 30

different countries, including penetration behind the Iron Curtain. Opus Dei does not publish any figures of membership and discourages collective pride in strength of numbers or influence. Its members carry no distinguishing badge, and as often as not are unknown to each other. It is explained that this anonymity prevents the temptation to get "jobs for the boys."

So much for the general outline. To fill it in your Correspondent has had the advantage of an informal off-the-record talk with the founder, and also of observing Opus Dei in its most controversial aspect—in Spain.

HUMANE AND HAPPY

Mgr. Escrivá is not yet 60 and could well be taken for 10 years younger. His most striking characteristic, in all the circumstances, is that of absolute normality. There is nothing fanatical or domineering in his manner, none of the expected marks of a great originator or a leader of men. The suggestion of personal magnetism or of spiritual energy may easily be missed. He is of middle height and weight, with a pallid, rounded face more often smiling than not. There is a warmth of expression in his brown eyes, and a nervous energy in him betrayed by the rapidity and play of his voice and gesture. He is direct and personal in his approach, but impressionistic rather than tactual; a man that deals in broad lines and bold strokes, delegating detail with ease and confidence: the independence and individual responsibility of members is always stressed. Surrounded as he is by enthusiastic disciples, he appears to be indifferent to criticism. A lasting impression is of a humane and happy character who would have much in common with Sir Thomas More, whom, indeed, he has chosen as a patron saint of his movement.

Every powerful enterprise has its enemies, and Opus Dei is no exception to the rule. Not surprisingly, the debate is sharpest in Spain, not only because the Spanish temper itself tends to make it so but because Opus Dei was born on the eve of a civil war there and has existed under an all-pervading and State censorship ever since. When into such a fog comes a movement that is avowedly clandestine, the shapes which it takes even in the most normal minds may be fantastic. Some Spaniards can see Opus Dei only as a sectarian octopus grasping at the seats of learning throughout the country; others see it as a neo-Falangist gang plotting for the restoration of the monarchy on its own terms; others as the mainstay of General Franco's Government since the reshuffle of 1957.

"MIDDLE-CLASS" FIELD

So far as politics are concerned, in theory no orthodoxy is expected of members of Opus Dei. Leading figures seem to be divided between supporters of General Franco and right-wing monarchists. Difficult as it is to identify members of Opus Dei, it may be said with some certainty that none has been signatory to the various responsible petitions to General Franco that have been made in these past years for political amnesty and the like. The main field of its activity in Spain is middle-class.

The accusation that Opus Dei seeks to seize power in the universities is denied with a vehemence that is not above suspicion. It seems fair to say that Opus Dei looks after its own, that it does not regard academic distinction as the only criterion for an academic post, and that it considers itself the zealous watchdog of religious orthodoxy.

There remains a hard core of objection to specific aspects of the movement. Its clandestine character is undoubtedly a major irritant. The defence that clandestinity is in fact humility seen from the outside does not always convince. There is the natural irritation at any "holier-than-thou" attitude, though certainly *Camino* does its best to quash any such tendency.

Finally Mgr. Escrivá is watching over the infancy of a movement that has history ahead of it. Few religious founders would recognize their sons at first glance after a century or so. What they leave behind is a family analogous to any other, with its variations and reverberations to type. The achievement of Mgr. Escrivá is to have formed a corporate entity of mature men of many nations, inspired by principles at once novel and elementary.