

THE SECRET WORLD OF OPUS DEI

By Henry Kamm

IN AN IMPOSING MANSION NEAR THE VILLA Borghese park in Rome, Msgr. Álvaro del Portillo y Díez de Soláns — the head of the international religious society known as Opus Dei — had in his new study of Pratano, which Pope John Paul II bestowed on him a week ago, a 10-year-old Spaniard, who now wears a golden bishop's ring along with his silver papal crest, was so affable as to make me almost forget that I had been put off for nearly a year before being granted the rare privilege of a meeting. Opus Dei is not known to be written about by anyone.

But Opus Dei doesn't like it is sacrilegious. "Sacrilege?" declared Monsignor del Portillo with a laugh. "It's what?" What I asked whether Opus Dei had a core prayer. He dropped to his knees and, reciting in a young Spanish priest accompanying him to do the same, he intoned the prayer, called "Pater." "Then, alone, he reverently kissed the floor. "Perhaps it is a question of bestiality," he said, resuming his seat. "To kiss the ground is a holy rite, and they don't want to be associated with it."

In the pontificate of John Paul II, the Jesuits were, until recently, the Roman Catholic organization most visibly at the center of controversy. The traditionalist Pope was clearly upset over what he saw as their excessive liberalism. Now that he has allowed them to elect a new general, the Rev. Peter Hans Kolvenbach, ending to extraordinary period of direct papal rule, that quarrel appears to have been resolved. But what has become larger than John Paul's differences with the Jesuits is a new public but no less intense controversy over Opus Dei. The dispute has been far less in the public eye because Opus Dei (which, like the much older Society of Jesus, is of Spanish origin) fluctuates in step with the conservative Pope.

John Paul II's display of favor to The Work — as its American members and supporters invariably call the lay organization whose Latin name means "God's Work" — have caused chagrin among liberal churchmen, an unhappiness that has been mixed not only because most fervent disciplined priests are, when angry but because as little is known about The Work's internal workings. "The church has no idea what Opus Dei is up to," said an American priest studying in Rome, echoing a view widely held by priests and laymen not sympathetic to Opus Dei. Critics fear that John Paul's high esteem for Opus Dei might confer power over church policy-making on the group.

To Monsignor del Portillo, smiling benevolently and somewhat paternally through an hour's conversation in Spanish, Italian, French and English, there is no cause for controversy. Excluding the almost instantaneous assurance that membership conversations of Opus Dei members with outsiders be qualified as "confidential" stemming from "the Devil," the great bulk of criticisms that have been leveled at Opus Dei. These include accusations general over members: involvement in right-wing politics, particularly in the Government of Francisco Franco during its long dictatorship and more recently, it is rumored, on behalf of right-wing Latin American regimes; recruiting of young people without parental consent and alienating them from their families; discrimination against women, and so forth.

Monsignor del Portillo categorically rejected such accusations without offering contrary information. Although he demonstrated that there was nothing unusual about citing the *Proces*, for instance, the Testimony that the full text of the gospels, which is drawn from various parts of the Roman Catholic liturgy, is known only to Opus Dei members and those brought to it from a broad among them that excludes outsiders.

As do other members of the organization, Monsignor del Portillo affirms consistently and with utter certainty that Opus Dei is "faithful to the magisterium of the church, the Pope and the bishops" and has "no theology or doctrine specific to us." In the view consistently voiced by its members, Opus Dei does no more and no less than the Roman Catholic faith demands of its faithful.

For many of its members, this certainty that the faith must be lived fully seems to resolve the painful ambivalence that grew of men and women, particularly the young, who take their religion seriously and who are troubled by the frequent dichotomy between the purity of faith and the accommodations of everyday life.

IN MID-JULY 1982, OPUS DEI ACQUIRED THE STATUS of a "personal prelature," the first and so far the only one of its kind authorized by the Sacred Congregation. It meant that Opus Dei became similar to a worldwide diocese, with a Prelate who, like heads of religious orders, has authority throughout the world over its members. Since Roman Catholic laymen are normally fully under the authority of their local bishops, this establishes a new principle of power sharing between diocesan bishops and The Prelate. In view of the Pope's evident favor, this would be the diocesan bishop who, in case of conflict, would stand against Opus Dei.

Henry Kamm is The Times' bureau chief in Rome.

Pope John Paul II ordaining James A. Kelly Jr., an Opus Dei member from Worcester, Mass. Critics fear that the Pope's high esteem for Opus Dei might confer power over church policy-making on the group.

The international religious society, known for its strict conservatism and its air of carefully nourished mystery, now enjoys the favor of the traditionalist John Paul II.

The devout flock to the flower-bedecked crypt of Opus Dei's founder, Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Alba, in Rome, right. On the marble slab of the tomb, the inscription reads simply "El Padre."

Alvaro del Portillo y Díaz de Sollana, below, is the second priest to head the lay society, which was started in 1928 and is Spanish in origin.



"Opus Dei was a new phenomenon in the church, and no juridical situation that fit it had been foreseen earlier," said The Prelate, as Monsignor del Portillo is now referred to within The Work. Before the change in status, Monsignor del Portillo, then the society's president-general, was spoken of as "The Father," a title held until his death in 1975 by The Founder, Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Alba. Now, Monsignor Escrivá is always called The Founder (in the respectful way in which Opus Dei members utter these titles, the capitals cannot be beard). But on the dark green marble slab of his tomb, in a crypt under Opus Dei headquarters at Viale Bruno Buozzi, the inscription reads simply "El Padre." A cross and his date — Jan. 9, 1928, and June 24, 1975 — are the only other inscriptions.

At most hours of the day and evening, worshippers sit or kneel by the tomb. They kiss the marble, and on it place tiny offerings — by proximity — rosaries, crosses or cards bearing Msgr. Escrivá's portrait and a prayer for his intervention with God on behalf of the worshipper. The cards are issued by groups devoted to advancing the cause of Monsignor Escrivá's sainthood, a procedure officially opened by the Vatican in 1981.

A mass is celebrated at the tomb every day at noon; pillows are placed along both sides to facilitate kneeling, and red roses in silver vases line the tomb's head and foot. Near the entrance to the crypt stands the bust in which The Founder was buried in his native town of Barbastro in Aragon. With evident foresight for his posthumous fame, Monsignor Escrivá ordered the crypt to be built when construction of the mansion was begun in 1941.

The Founder, son of a carpenter, conceived Opus Dei while praying alone in a room in a convent in Madrid. His hagiographers describe the event as a sudden vision, while the bells of the nearby Church of Our Lady of the Angels rang out. Although during his lifetime Monsignor Escrivá limited himself to suggestions that he was guided by direct contact with the Divinity in the vital decisions affecting Opus Dei, the petition for his beatification drops his reserve: "While he prayed in his room, it pleased God to enlighten him," declares the petition. He saw Opus Dei "as the Lord wished it and how it would be in the course of the centuries."

Begun by Monsignor Escrivá in 1928, Opus Dei was to help ordinary people seek sanctification in pursuing their everyday lives. To The Founder, Christ's first 30 years, during which he lived an ordinary existence in the home of Joseph and Mary, were as important as his last three years, during which he revealed his calling.

According to Monsignor del Portillo, today there are more than 76,000 Opus Dei members in 42 countries. Thirty thousand of them are committed to celibacy — of whom about 2 percent are priests — and roughly half the members are women. Opus Dei volunteers almost no participants on its membership and internal practices, and Giuseppe Corigliano, the head of its Rome information office, merely said that Spanish members remain the largest national group, with Mexicans second and Italians third.

Michael Barrett, a 31-year-old New Yorker and a member of the American board of directors of Opus Dei, said that Opus Dei has about 3,000 American members. Mr. Barrett, who joined Opus Dei while studying chemistry at Columbia University, was for a time an account executive at a major stock brokerage firm. He arrived in Rome late last year to study theology at an Opus Dei school.

Both in and out of the church, Opus Dei is taken seriously because it is an organization of scholars. Its male celibate members, who dedicate their lives to the organization, are largely drawn from the professions. They contribute all their earnings to Opus Dei and receive in return spending money, which has to be accounted for. Married members, who have to provide for their families, are urged to make substantial regular contributions.

In addition to its members, Opus Dei says it has a much larger international body of followers, whom it terms "cooperators." Mr. Barrett explained that they receive "the spiritual benefits of Opus Dei, help to pay for its activities and otherwise foster them." Opus Dei spokesman declined to elaborate on its financial affairs.

Women, too, are members — mainly married — professional women members and cooperators; they are also responsible for the care and maintenance of Opus Dei centers where male and female celibates live. "Women can't be scholars. It's enough for them to be present," The Founder wrote.

Separation between men and women members who live at the same Opus Dei center is so strict that there must be double doors with separate keys for each gender. They are not allowed to talk to each other except for the necessities of work. A typical conversation is conducted by hand telephone, containing no word of greeting or personal inquiry such as "How are you?" and is restricted to the passing of such information as the number of men having lunch that day or whether a second helping of spaghetti is required.

When the women are cleaning the man's quarters, no man is allowed to be on the same floor. Two women — wearing trim, beige uniforms designed, it seemed, as a cross between a nun's habit and a chambermaid's costume in a period play — had to be out of the reception room they had just exited before I was ushered in to await The Prelate. At the end of the meeting, one of them waited in a small foyer at the entrance door, a gray area between male and female quarters, to hand me my coat.

OPUS DEI RUNS A NUMBER OF PUBLIC institutions in accordance with its own strict standards and disciplines; universities in Spain, Mexico, Colombia and Peru; schools in Spain, Mexico, Colombia and Peru; schools far apart as Potomac, Md., and Nairobi, Kenya; youth centers in Chicago, Rome and many other cities; university student residences near many campuses, including about 30 in the United States.

But men who speak for the organization assert that to run institutions is not the heart of Opus Dei's mission. "Opus Dei's main role is forming individual people, one on one, to help them to see how to be very good Catholics, how to become saints, how to be good stewards to a heroic degree," said Mr. Barrett.

It is this "forming" of individuals, according to The Founder's clearly defined notion of what constitutes a "very good Catholic," that makes Opus Dei so controversial. At a time when the bonds of strict orthodoxy in Catholic observance have been loosened, when the church has been struggling to find ways of applying the liberalizing teachings of Vatican II without endangering the discipline of doctrine and ritual, Opus Dei is militantly orthodox.

In orthodoxy starts with the strictest interpretation of the words and actions of Monsignor Escrivá, who set forth his notions of a Catholic life in a number of books and an even greater volume of internal directives kept under lock and key in Opus Dei centers. The Founder's instructions go into minute detail, leaving nothing to chance, including, according to Klaus Stigleder, a 35-year-old former Opus Dei member, particulars on how to iron and fold the cloth that covers the altar during mass. Mr. Stigleder was for five years a full-fledged member, pledged to celibacy; he is now studying theology and philosophy at Tübingen University in West Germany.

Their theology stands and falls with The Founder's authority, "said Mr. Stigleder, who broke with the organization four years ago and who has just published a sharply detailed account of his association with Opus Dei with the Zurich Catholic publishing house of Benziger. "This is legitimized as having been received directly from God. We are supposed to have concrete knowledge of God's will. This allows them to call continually on an authority that cannot be criticized."

Indeed, Monsignor del Portillo, asked whether there was some truth to criticisms that Opus Dei devotes a full-fledged cult to his predecessor, replied with a knowing smile, "We are his children, we know that. He was a very great person. I know that as his confessor for 20 years. He was always at the service of others. He was of such superior intelligence. He was so very sympathetic. He wrote so very well. We are his children; we cannot criticize our father. I have so many marvelous things about him."

The walls of the room in which The Prelate receives outside visitors bear family photographs of The Founder in all stages of life, from childhood on, as well as pictures of his parents. Mr. Conigliano said that this represented a conscious effort to emphasize that Opus Dei is a family, presided over by a father.



In accordance with a strict notion of family life, Opus Dei discipline includes constant supervision of each member's life — public, private and interior; the imposition of a more religious discipline and amortification of the flesh; community of intellectual and cultural activities, and steady urging to fulfill the individual's potential, that is, to bring new members to The Work.

Adherence to Opus Dei discipline is strictest among the category of members known as supernumeraries — men and women who pledge themselves to a life of full availability to the organization, which in Opus Dei is interpreted as rapidly as celibacy. Although Opus Dei maintains that its members seek sanctity while pursuing their normal lives, almost half of its members lead the special life of celibacy.

Juan Antonio Pérez López, dean of the University of Navarra's Graduate School of Business Administration in Barcelona and a leading numerary, explained that this is the case because the organization is still in its infancy, when there would be many more who are fully committed. The number of supernumeraries, or numerically speaking, will increase as the organization grows, said Dr. Pérez López, who holds a doctorate in business administration from Harvard.

Opus Dei values its male supernumeraries largely from those whose character is likely to lead them to positions of influence over others. The society sometimes even charters its young members into changing a career. Critics contend that it is with the intention of recruiting people who will be influential in promoting the Opus Dei way that the University of Navarra, whose main campus is in Pamplona, has created the most important school for business executives and journalists in Spain. The society's principal beneficent center, the university was founded by Opus Dei in 1952 and is fully under its direction.

Although Opus Dei insists that

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Opus Dei headquarters in Roma, right. Opus Dei discipline includes constant supervision of each member's life — public, private and interior — and mortification of the flesh. The organization claims more than 70,000 members worldwide with male celibate members — drawn largely from the professions — contributing all their earnings to the group.

Elevated to the status of a 'personal prelature' by the Pope in 1982, Opus Dei has worldwide authority over its members, its Prelate sharing power with local bishops.

OPUS DEI

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all its members are equal; numeraries are nonetheless considered the elite, on which it counts to expand its membership and influence. Working-class members pledged to celibacy are known as associates and they continue to live with their parents or other relatives. Numeraries, on the other hand, usually live together in small groups and perform communally some of the religious rites required by their status.

What is required applies to numeraries, associates and supernumeraries but more fully and rigorously to numeraries. These rites to fill the member's day that strict observance according to Mr. Steigeder, as well as a Barcelona priest who left the organization after 20 years' membership, approach a form of submission to totalitarian control.

An Opus Dei member must attend mass daily and receive communion. He is to spend a half-hour twice a day in private prayer, as well as

recite the rosary, the midday prayer of the Angels and special bedtime prayers. The specifically Opus Dei prayer, the Praise, is another daily obligation, as well as 15 minutes reading of the Gospel or other religious texts. Opus Dei also counsels its members and supporters to utter frequent "ejaculations"— spontaneous short prayers at any time or place.

Members are required to go to confession once a week and urged to make their confession to a priest belonging to the Opus Dei canon law they attend. Confession to an outside priest, while permitted, is frowned upon as the group believes members would not understand its special spirituality.

Confession does not replace obligatory regular meetings with a numerary who is assigned to each member as his or her spiritual adviser or director. Members are expected to discuss all aspects of their lives in these sessions, which are called "con-

fessions." They also have the daily shorter frequent "trivial confessions" to follow members for infractions of the spirit of The Work. In addition, each member needs aside a daily period for a methodical searching of his or her conscience.

Special prayers on special days of the church calendar are prescribed, as are a monthly day of retreat and an annual five-day retreat.

When Opus Dei members are urged to sleep on a plank until they are 40 years old; none do so only once a year. All members are advised to undergo frequent "mortifications" in the form of self-denial of pleasures and comforts, including the innocent, the้าง, give off or similar discomforts.

Once a week, usually on Saturday, numeraries apply the "discipline" of reciting a prayer while flogging themselves with white canes or other give them as a token of full membership or, according to Mr. Corigliano, bought as a punishment to prominent and numinous Numeraries also wear at regular intervals a limited penitence device—a device or garment designed to inflict pain, for

Opus Dei members, it consists of a metal chain with sharp tips that prick into the upper thighs.

Opus Dei members are generally dominated or controlled by discussions of the papalization and the wearing of clerical garb—practices that nowadays exist as regular routines only among the more extreme religious orders, such as the Carmelites, and have largely disappeared from the mainstream of Roman Catholic life.

"The Lord wants your heart, not your body," a senior Jesuit remarked. Churchmen believe that Opus Dei is the first organization to introduce such mortifications as regular exercises for lay people. According to those who are knowledgeable about the organization, the case for themselves on the benefits for the length of a "half-century," women do so on the weekends. Their form of papalization, say those Opus Dei adepts, is much less severe than the flagging mentioned earlier. "It is inflicted on himself," since he used a whip intended to draw blood.

Yes, we encourage members to use this discipline on a weekly basis," said Mr. Bar-

rera. "But it is so severe and terrible for me to talk about that that only when one finds I have to question on one line."

Mr. Steigeder and Portillo, however, do not consider the question of discipline as something unique. "It is really nothing," the former said. "It is a normal thing for those who want to follow Christ's path definitely," he said. "It is a normal, terrible thing—a small mortification. It is ridiculous. I laugh when I read about it—it is so little. It is much worse what the husband does to the wife, and she to the husband."

Mr. Steigeder continued, as Opus Dei members often do when confronted with critics of the organization's practices, that they are no more than what the church requires. "It is true, we mortify ourselves, but we do only what all the religious in the Catholic Church do. The secretary of Pope Paul VI said the Pope were a cleric."

While not specifying the routine of disciplines and mortifications in detail, The Founder's most widely dis-

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OPUS DEI

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Monsignor Escrivá, Opus Dei's founder, is shown in Spain in 1972.

tributed work, "The Way," provides in the form of 100 meditations a guidepost for all occasions. In language that members and followers consider inspired by its directness and critics deem a banalization of prayer and religious discourse, Monsignor Escrivá laid down his views of an individual's relationship with God.

On the importance of the spiritual advisor's control over members, for instance, Monsignor Escrivá wrote: "Here is a safe doctrine that I want you to know: one's own mind is a bad adviser . . . That is why it is the will of God that the command of the ship be entrusted to a Master . . ." Or, he wrote in another maxim that typifies the peremptory and informal tone of "The Way," of which more than three million copies in 36 languages are said to circulate: "A Director. You need one. So that you can give yourself to God . . . by obedience."

It is the director's job to round out his charges on their intellectual interests and censor their reading and television and movie fare. "Completely free," he said. "It's a good gift." But Monsignor Escrivá was asked whether there was a list of books forbidden to members. "But the children were people they have to be careful of books that are dangerous to their faith."

The Founder made his views clear in Volume 58 of "The Way" book: "Don't buy them without advice from a Christian who is learned and proven. It's so easy to buy

something useless or harmful."

A three-day visit to the University of Navarra in Pamplona provided insight into how this injunction is put into practice. "Naturally we have no professors who are Marxist or sympathetic to Marxism as a mode of thinking," said Prof. Alejandro Urena, chairman of the philosophy department.

Students can "naturally use all the books in the library," Professor Urena continued. But he went on to list exceptions, books to which he said access was restricted. "From the scientific and, why not say it, from the ideological point of view," he said, "some books must be restricted. He mentioned Marx and Maoist writers again.

Jean-Paul Sartre, he said, was "not very suitable for young students," and he cited the case of a youth who committed suicide after reading Kierkegaard. "It leads to anguish," he said, and Schopenhauer is "very pessimistic." It is the duty of philosophy professors, the chairman concluded, "not to lead students to cover their heads."

Professor Pedro Lopez said that at his Graduate School of Business no course could be taught with content that was Marxist or "pure materialist liberalism." He said he had experienced such teaching at Harvard.

Angel Maria Dugay, head of the University Library, said a visitor through the main doors to show him how the Red and the number of books that are required "to be in

line" to a very small audience of French historians, wrote of Escrivá, "Liberator, Educator, Educator, Statesman and Teacher" and "one of the greatest teachers ever."

Universities generally continue to be relatively closed. The predominantly clerical core almost always divides between the "orthodox" and the "heretics," the latter including Pope John Paul II, Bishop Marcello Spallanzani, Msgr. Giuseppe Giarratano, Father John Henry Newman and Cardinal Agostino Casaroli.

Such a implemented and extremely focused life has led many Opus Dei members to make up of a day of leading themselves. "Strangely, learning is a soaring experience," said the "Brahma priest," who added he now enjoys because he still believes in much of the spirit of Opus Dei, especially the organization's aim of uniting lay people on the path of sanctifying their lives.

"I had total, exclusive dedication for the love of 20 years," he said. He paid still papalistic after 20 years of separation. "And the attitude toward those who leave the Opus Dei is to welcome them. It's leaving the band during a storm. Let him see how bright colors."

Although he accepted Opus Dei's hierarchical control to the point of becoming a priest, he said, "he became a priest, he was a growing sense of having given up his mind to others, that led him to break away." "Intellectual control is so complete that members accept a life without discussion of anything," he said.

"That critical spirit — I admit that there are no unworthy motives behind it — should not be exercised upon your spouses, nor upon your brothers," wrote Monsignor Escrivá. In a series of interviews with Opus Dei members of various nationalities in Rome and at the University of Navarra, none offered any criticism of the organization. "I am 100 percent," said Mr. Carrington, reflecting a pervasive attitude among Opus Dei members.

In carrying out its mandate, Opus Dei often appears to be a secret society. In their most mysterious days, Opus Dei recruiters do not identify themselves as Opus Dei representatives and persons are not recruited.

Mr. Carrington, one of a distinguished dermatologist and a leader even before he reached high school, was approached at page 13 and be-

