

WHY IS OPUS DEI CRITICIZED?

Rafael Gomez

It is well known that what is 'normal' does not make news. Nor does what is 'normal', what receives support from a wide spectrum of people, stand out in the public eye.

A number of different explanations (and they are not mutually exclusive) can be given to explain the persistence with which Opus Dei is criticized.

Supplying the market

The first, somewhat trivial, reason is that Opus Dei, like it or not, is 'topical'. Here we have something which is Catholic, is spread all over the world, and which, besides, is seen to 'work'. Much has been written about it and nobody doubts its importance. An unscrupulous journalist (by that I mean one who is not too concerned about obtaining accurate information about Opus Dei or simply wants to organize a debate among supposed experts) will occasionally just launch forth. For him or her Opus Dei is just one topic in a list of thirty or forty which are deemed 'sensational'. Not all, or even the majority of publications, go in for sensationalism but in every country there are newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programs which specialize in such matters. It is a market which has to be supplied and accommodated.

In a secularist society

Secondly, it is possible that Opus Dei grates on some people. The Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Italy, a priest and

formerly an engineer, Mgr Mario Lantini has written that 'one ought not to be surprised that in a society strongly influenced by "secularism" there are people who do not understand and find annoying the very existence of Christians who try to live to the full all the implications of their baptismal calling, not only in the intimacy of their conscience and within the structures of a parish but also in their work, and in their cultural and social activities.' It may seem paradoxical that some people get angry with other people's lifestyles (normally these things are put to one side and ignored), especially in today's sanitized society which considers tolerance a paramount value. But that is the way it is.

No true grasp

Thirdly, in matters of public opinion, disinformation often originates in the ease with which people write about matters they do not understand. This happens, not because of bad will, but because there are so many items to be dealt with that time does not allow a person to gather together sufficient documentation. Sometimes, of course, sheer laziness lies at the root of such an attitude.

Genuinely interested

Fourthly, it must be acknowledged that from time to time the attacks against Opus Dei in the mass media do not arise from a desire for the sensational.

There is a genuine attempt to treat the matter seriously. Then what about criticisms levelled against Opus Dei and backed up by some churchman or woman (generally a religious, I might add)? How can this be explained? By way of answer it is worth noting that in none of the biographies of Blessed Josemaría, nor in the detailed study to be found in a recent publication: *The Canonical Path of Opus Dei*, nor in books or articles published by Opus Dei members or 'sympathizers' is there any reason given for the why and wherefore of these attacks which have been on the go at least since 1934. On the other hand, in publications which are denigratory in character a frequent topic which crops up is the supposed confrontation between the Society of Jesus and Opus Dei.

This topic came up during the years when the media spotlight was on Opus Dei. In an interview with Tad Szulc of the *New York Times*, in 1966, the Founder of Opus Dei was asked: 'Why is Opus Dei, in your opinion, resented by numerous religious orders, such as the Society of Jesus?' His reply was quite nuanced: we are not religious, but we esteem them and there are many who return our affection. He then said: 'There will never be a dispute between Opus Dei and a religious; it takes two to make an argument, and we have no desire to argue with anyone. . . . With respect to the Society of Jesus, I am personally acquainted with Fr Arrupe, its Superior General, and can assure you that our relations are of mutual esteem and affection.'

As can be seen, the Founder of Opus Dei did not become embroiled in the

matter of possible attacks by individual Jesuits and much less by the Order as a whole. What is palpably clear is his refusal to become involved in public or private arguments. Hence one can understand why the writings of Opus Dei members are silent about these matters, and do not even mention the names of those who did the attacking.

Unjust accusation

Nevertheless, it is not by chance that one of the most unjust books ever written about Opus Dei—the one authored by Michael Walsh which simply recycles a whole host of false accusations long since disproven—comes from the pen of a person who, when he began the book, was a Jesuit. (It is also significant that by the time he actually published the book he had left the Society.)

Opus Dei's unwillingness to become involved in arguments in general, and with other Catholic institutions in particular, is understandable when one reads the history of the Church. This history is replete with divisions between religious orders and congregations, with accusations hurled against one another, and with declarations of condemnation. Time has shown that, on being attacked from very early on, and attacked with invective, Opus Dei has never counter-attacked. There is not a single book or article emanating from the Prelature in general or from any individual member against anyone. 'There will never be a dispute between Opus Dei and a religious.' The Founder's example in this matter has been followed to the letter.

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Blowing one's own trumpet

Fifthly, it is within the bounds of possibility that, when faced with people who are unwilling or unable to understand, Opus Dei members have not been good at giving adequate explanations. There is also the question whether a Church institution can or should engage in publicizing the good it is doing. In principle, it might seem that it should not, on the basis of 'giving all the glory to God'. But the times in which we live make such a *modus vivendi* practically impossible. The mass media are always hungry for news and normally good news is no news. It should also be borne in mind that no individual member of Opus Dei

represents the Prelature, nor does he or she speak on its behalf. Being one of the faithful of the Prelature affects only a person's interior life and apostolate. So, there is absolutely no reason why membership should be alluded to when speaking about other matters. The problem is that, by not referring to one's membership, the faithful who do belong to Opus Dei are accused of using secrecy as a weapon whereas in actual fact they are just being reserved in what has to do with their private lives.

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Rafael Gómez is a well known Spanish journalist and a member of Opus Dei.