

A CENTURY OF ESCRIVA

By Inside the Vatican staff

Opus Dei marked the 100th anniversary of its founder's birth with a major Roman conference which explored the history and importance of Opus Dei for the Church and the world



With the canonization of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer just months away (it is expected in September), members and friends of Opus Dei recently gathered in Rome to mark the 100th anniversary of the founder's birth and reflect on the meaning of "the Work" he founded.

Some Vatican observers see Escrivá's elevation to sainthood as one of the most important in a century. (In late December, Pope John Paul II announced the confirmation of a final miracle necessary to canonize the Spanish priest, who founded Opus Dei, Latin for "God's Work," in 1928.)

One journalist, who has been covering the Vatican for 35 years and is Catholic, but not affiliated with Opus Dei, told *Inside the Vatican*: "For the Church, the importance of Escrivá's canonization compares to those of St. Therese of Lisieux and St. Ignatius of Loyola." The journalist continued: "The impact Opus Dei has had on changing lay life in the Church is similar to the influence Ignatius had on changing religious life."

Some Opus Dei members see the group's impact on the Church, rather, as going back to something much older than even religious orders. Yago de la Cierva, Secretary-General of the Centenary Congress, told us: "I think the beauty of the message of Blessed Josemaría stands precisely in the return to the early Christians, when the faithful didn't think that the 'real Christians' were others than them! So they felt the responsibility of changing the world and making a Christian society."

And indeed the "lay mentality" and the universal call to holiness which Opus Dei strives to promote is already being imitated by various groups and faithful within the Church since the birth of the Prelature. But, on this point as well, members of "The Work," as it is often called, are clear: "We are just one of many great groups in the mosaic of the Church today striving to be holy, faithful and effective in spreading the Gospel."

Opus Dei, like a number of other relatively new groups in the Church, however, is seen by many observers as contro-

versial. The secular press and certain Catholic groups have charged that Opus Dei is dangerous for the Church because it is too "traditional," secretive, and solely focused on recruiting rich and successful people. Opus Dei members respond by appealing to a higher authority: "Well, if the Pope is controversial, then I guess we're controversial too," they say. "Furthermore, we believe people in positions of leadership and responsibility need to sanctify their daily lives also, but we have members from all classes of society."

Regarding the secrecy charges, one Opus Dei member told us: "We're not secretive at all. Ask me anything you want to know and I'll tell you. It might be that we're somewhat discreet. We don't feel that we need to wear a badge on our shirts

Opus Dei's impact was evident at the conference held in Rome on January 7-12: it drew 1,200 people from 57 countries and all walks of life.

For a Nigerian member of Opus Dei, the conference was all the proof needed that Blessed Escriva has the relevance and universal appeal of a modern saint. Dymphna Ezeani of Enugu, Nigeria, said: "There are so many people here from so many countries because of one man who had one idea, that everyone is called to holiness in their everyday lives."

Ezeani, who is a lawyer, said the canonization will be a special event for Opus Dei members, but she came to Rome for the January conference "because this offers in-depth discussions on his life and work."

The conference included nine major speeches, more than 100 addresses and 18 workshops with 260 participants sharing their views on everything from how Blessed Escriva's teaching has affected their artistic creativity to how parents can balance the demands of work and family.

The most important aspect of the congress, according to participants, was the Mass at Opus Dei's Sant'Eugenio parish in Rome, held on January 9, Escriva's birthday.

Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the Pope's vicar for the Rome diocese, was the main celebrant.

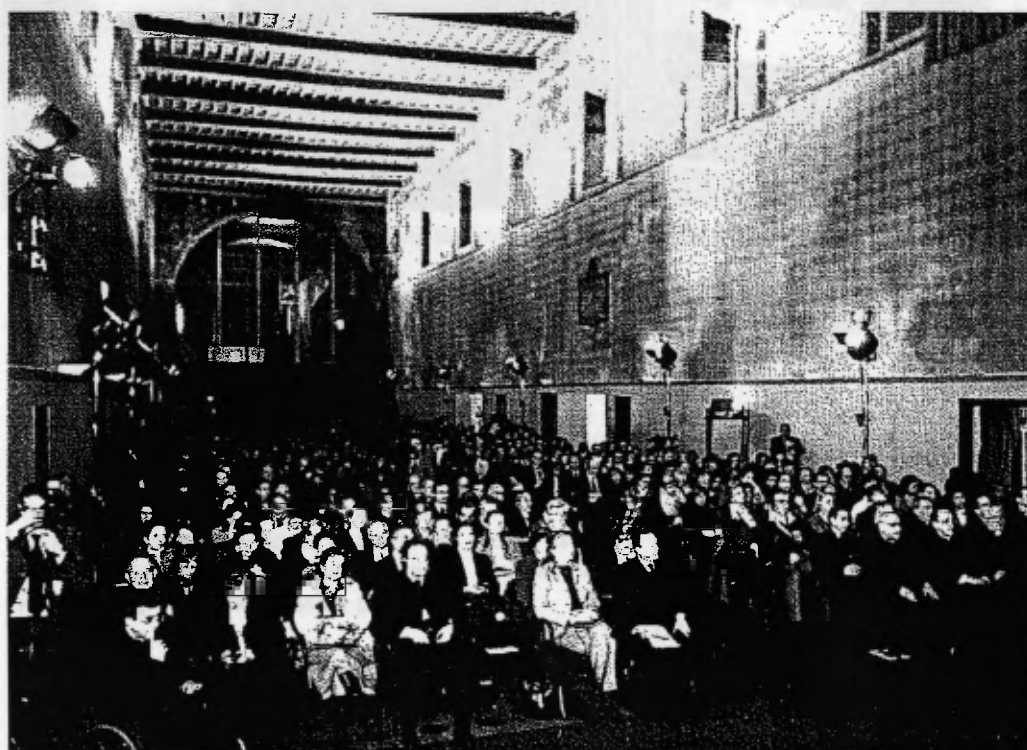
Concelebrants included Cardinals Giovanni Battista Re, Francis Ngyuen Xavier Van Thuan, Paul Poupard, Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, Jose Saraiva Martins, Sergio Sebastiani, Eduardo Martinez Somalo, the Prelate of Opus Dei, Bishop Javier Echevarria, and 40 other bishops and priests.

The Italian post office even released a stamp featuring Blessed Escriva on January 9.

When asked how many of the participants who were at the gathering are Opus Dei members, della Cierva said: "It's difficult to say, because we don't ask the people when they sign up to come whether they're members or not. But, I'd say, obviously, there are a lot of members and many others who strongly appreciate Blessed Escriva."

Among the list of speakers were a Chilean rabbi, a Russian Orthodox philosopher and a Muslim economist who all spoke on different aspects of the importance of Blessed Escriva's message. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, was also a noted guest.

Philosopher Eugueny Pazukhin recently published a biography of Blessed Escriva (see *Inside the Vatican*, November 2001) and told the congress he thinks the future saint's teaching contains current and lasting relevance for Christian unity and for the ailing Russian society.



Left, Mireille Heers, Professor of Law, Institute of Political Studies of Strasbourg. Above, Santo Spirito in Sassia, a few steps from the Vatican, where the Centennial Congress was held

saying, 'Look at me, I'm Catholic.' Rather, we try to humbly and faithfully live the Catholic faith by example and deed, speaking out if necessary."

The media reaction to the news of Escriva's canonization has been decidedly different to the response 10 years ago when John Paul announced his beatification. Then, some in the press claimed that Escriva's path to becoming a blessed was "rushed through" and had received "special treatment" from the Vatican department responsible for causes of saints. Still, a number of officials who work in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints told us that "the cause of Escriva went through all the normal and proper steps required; the case was ready and in order and there was no 'special treatment.'"

Marc Carroggio, the Opus Dei spokesman for Rome, said: "In the weeks after the confirmation of the miracle paving the way for the canonization and at the time of the congress, I saw most of the articles in the world press, and it's a completely different story than 10 years ago."



George Pell, Archbishop of Sydney, during his talk on "The Christian, a Child of God"

The Opus Dei founder's emphasis on sanctifying one's work and using it to bring Christ to everyday life "could be the solid basis necessary for building the Russia of tomorrow" and for giving direction to people who are disoriented after more than a decade of upheaval, he said. Opus Dei's message that holiness is possible in everyday life is a source of optimism and would be "the best gift God could give to the Russian people," he added.

One of the main speakers at the congress, Archbishop George Pell of Sydney, Australia, talked about the Christocentric theology of Blessed Escriva and how "being focused on Christ means having a unity of life in prayer, in concern for souls and in work."

The archbishop said Opus Dei encourages members "to move from getting to know Christ to living like Christ," not just being nice or engaging in philanthropy, "but announcing and bringing Christ to all we meet."

Janne Haaland Matlary, a professor of international politics at the University of Oslo, Norway, told the congress she began studying the works of Escriva at a time when she felt her spiritual life and the rest of her life were too disconnected.

"Christ was either incarnated in my daily life or not at all," she said.

Matlary, who often works with the Vatican on issues related to women, children and the family, said Escriva's

writings reminded her that "the importance of work is found in the larger context of the goal of life, which is to be holy."

"There is only one life — not the religious life, the life of a citizen and the life of work — it all is one," she said.

For many people, she said, work often is not a place of fulfillment and joy, but rather a situation involving boredom, frustration, sometimes exploitation and often the fear of being laid off.

But even then, Escriva's teaching helps people face the challenges and accept the trials with strength provided by prayer and the sacraments.

The heart of his message, Matlary said, "is that your own ordinary life is unique, extraordinary, tailor-made by God for you, for your path to holiness."

Cecilia Royals, an Opus Dei member from Bethesda, Maryland (USA), said she came to the congress to listen to other people's experiences in "how they are living the teaching of Blessed Escriva." Royals said she particularly was struck by repeated references to the future saint's devotion to prayer.

"I will go home with a resolution to deepen my prayer," she said. "God is with me and wants me to share my day with him, my joys and sorrows, all day, not just at the beginning and end of the day."

Pablo Alamo, a Paraguayan student at Opus Dei's Holy Cross University in

Rome, said, "This is a conference to explore what other people have learned from or taken from Blessed Josemaría. It is not just about him, but about his influence on the life and thought of people who are not members of Opus Dei."

On the last day of the congress, Pope John Paul II received some 7,000 members of Opus Dei or people closely associated with it, including all the participants of the congress.

The Gospel message that all the baptized are called to Christian perfection was preached by the founder of Opus Dei in a way the world needs to hear, Pope John Paul II said.

"Blessed Josemaría Escriva placed at the center of his preaching the truth that all the baptized are called to the fullness of charity and that the most immediate way to reach this common goal is found in daily normality," the Pope said.

"For every baptized (person) who wants to follow Christ faithfully, the factory, the office, the library, the laboratory, the workshop and the home can transform themselves into places of encounter with the Lord," the Pope continued.

Pope John Paul said he underlined the same message in his 2000 apostolic letter on the new millennium, emphasizing "that the ideal of Christian perfection must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few 'uncommon heroes' of holiness."

Every part of every day, no matter how ordinary or boring, can become a time of prayer, an expression of love and an opportunity to share the Gospel, he said.

Allowing faith to infuse every moment of daily life is the key way lay people fulfill their baptismal obligations to be part of the Church's evangelization efforts, the Pope said.

Lay people, he said, must offer an antidote to the modern mentality "which sees the spiritual commitment as something belonging to the private sphere and therefore irrelevant to public activity."

With reporting by Cindy Wooden,
Catholic News Service