

An Interview with Monsignor Escriva Founder of Opus Dei

by Jacques Guilleme-Brulon



Jacques Guilleme-Brulon of Le Figaro, asked a series of questions to Msgr. Escriva de Balaguer, Founder and first President General of Opus Dei. The interview took place in Rome. It is interesting, not only for the timeliness of the topics but also because this is the first time that Msgr. Escriva granted an interview of this type. On May 16, 1966, Le Figaro published almost all the questions and answers. However, thanks to the kindness of Mr. Guilleme-Brulon we are able to reproduce the complete text of the interview. In presenting it, we would like to make our own the words of the French journalist: "May the author of The Way find here an expression of our regard for his boundless patience and his exceptionally good humor."

- Q. People have sometimes said that Opus Dei was organized internally along the lines of secret societies. What is to be thought of such a statement? Could you give us, with this in mind, your own idea of the message you wanted to address to the men of our time when you founded The Work in 1928?
- A. Ever since 1928 my preaching has been that sanctity is not reserved for the privileged few and that the ways

of the earth can be divine. The reason for this is that the spirituality proper to Opus Dei is based on the sanctification of ordinary work. The prejudice must be rejected that the ordinary faithful can do no more than limit themselves to helping the clergy in ecclesiastical apostolates. It must be remembered that to attain this supernatural end men need to be and to feel personally free with that freedom which Christ won for us.

To proclaim and to teach how to practice this doctrine I have never needed anything secret. The members of The Work detest secrecy because they are ordinary faithful, the same as anyone else. They do not change their status when they join Opus Dei. It would be repulsive for them to carry a sign on their backs that said, "Let it be known that I am dedicated to the service of God." That would be neither lay nor secular. But those who associate with and are acquainted with members of Opus Dei realize that they belong to The Work, for even if those members do not publicize it, neither do they hide it.

- Q. Could you give a brief picture of the worldwide structure of Opus Dei and of its relations with the General Council in Rome over which you preside?

- A. The General Council which is independent for each section — the men's and the women's — resides in Rome (*Anuario Pontificio*, 1966, pp. 885, 1226). A corresponding organization exists in each country, presided over by the counsellor of Opus Dei in that nation.

But do not think of a powerful organization, spread out like a vast network to the farthest corners of the world. Rather, imagine a *disorganized organization* in which the principal work of the Directors is to see that all the members receive the genuine spirit of the Gospels (a spirit of charity, of harmony, of understanding, all of which are absolutely foreign to fanaticism) by means of a solid and appropriate theological and apostolic formation. Beyond this each member acts with a complete and personal freedom. He forms his conscience with autonomy. And he tries to seek Christian perfection and to Christianize his environment, by sanctifying his own work, whether it is intellectual or manual, in all the circumstances of his life and in his own home.

Furthermore, direction in The Work is always collegial. We detest tyranny, especially in this exclusively spiritual government of Opus Dei. We love pluralism. The contrary would only lead to ineffectiveness, to neither doing nor letting others do, to never improving.

- Q. Point 484 in your spiritual code, *The Way*, specifies: "Your duty is to be an instrument." What meaning should be given to this statement in the context of the preceding questions?
- A. *The Way* a code? Not at all. I wrote a good part of that book in 1934, summarizing my priestly experience for the benefit of all the souls with whom I was in contact, whether they were in Opus Dei or not. I never suspected that thirty years later it would be spread so widely — millions of copies, in so many languages. It is not a book solely for members of Opus Dei. It is for everyone, whether Christian or non-Christian. Among those who have translated it on their own initiative are Orthodox, Protestants, and non-Christians. *The Way* must be read with at least some supernatural spirit, interior life, and apostolic feeling. It is not a code for the man of action. The book's aim is to help men to deal with God, to love Him, and to serve all men. In other words to be an instrument — which gets back to your question — as Paul the Apostle wanted to be an instrument of Christ. A free and responsible instrument. Anyone who tries to see a temporal goal in the pages of *The Way* is mistaken. Do not forget that it has been common for spiritual authors of every age to see souls as instruments in the hands of God.

- Q. Does Spain occupy a preferred position in The Work? Can it be considered the starting point of a more ambitious program, or is it just another area of activity among so many others?

A. Of the 65 countries where there are persons in Opus Dei, Spain is merely one among others, and we Spaniards are in the minority. Geographically, Opus Dei was born in Spain. But from the beginning its aim has been universal. And I myself have lived in Rome for twenty years.

- Q. Hasn't the fact that some members of The Work are active in the public life of Spain politicized Opus Dei in that country in some way? Don't they compromise The Work, and even the Church?

A. No, not in Spain, nor in any other place. I insist that each one of the members of Opus Dei carries on his work with full freedom and with personal responsibility. They compromise neither the Church nor The Work, for they are supported neither by the Church nor by The Work in the carrying out of their personal activities.

People who have a military concept of apostolate and spiritual life will always tend to see the free and personal work of Christians as a collective activity. But I assure you, as I have said again and again since 1928, that variety in thought and action in what is temporal and in what is a matter of theological opinion poses no problem for The Work. On the contrary, the diversity which exists and always will exist among the members of Opus Dei is a manifestation of good spirit, of an honest life, of respect for the legitimate opinion of each individual.

- Q. Do you not believe that in Spain, by reason of the particularism inherent in the Iberian people, a group within The Work could be tempted to use its power to satisfy particular interests?

A. You have formulated an hypothesis which I dare to guarantee will never occur in The Work. Not only because we associate *exclusively* for supernatural ends, but also because if a member of Opus Dei should attempt to impose, directly or indirectly, a temporal criterion on the other members, or if he should try to make use of them for human ends, he would be expelled at once. For the other members would rebel and their rebellion would be legitimate and holy.

- Q. In Spain Opus Dei prides itself on including people from all social classes. Is this valid for the rest of the world, or must it be admitted that in other countries the members of Opus Dei come from the upper classes such as the top levels of industry, administration and politics, and the professions?

A. In Spain and in the whole world, people of all social conditions belong in fact to Opus Dei: men and women, old and young, workers, businessmen, clerks, farmers, members of the professions, etc. It is God who gives the vocation, and with God there is no distinction of persons.

But Opus Dei does not pride itself on anything. Apostolic undertakings grow, not by human effort, but by the breathing of the Holy Spirit. It is logical for an association with earthly aims to publish impressive statistics on the number, situation, and qualities of its members. And in fact, this is what organizations in search of temporal prestige usually do. But when the sanctification of souls is the aim, to act in such a way would encourage collective pride. Yet Christ wants each individual Christian personally and the whole Christian body collectively to be humble.

Q. How is The Work developing in France at the present time?

A. As I was telling you, the government of The Work in each country is autonomous. You can obtain the best information on the work of Opus Dei in France by asking the Directors of The Work in that country. But among the activities Opus Dei carries on corporately, and for which it is responsible as such, there are student residences like the Residence Internationale de Rouvray in Paris and the Residence Universitaire de l'Île Verte in Grenoble; conference centers like the Centre de Rencontres Couvrelles in the Department of Aisne; etc.

But let me remind you that the corporate works are the least important thing. The main task of Opus Dei is the direct, personal witness which the members give in the practice of their own ordinary work. And for this, it is useless to count the members. But do not think about the ghost of secrecy. Not at all. The birds that fill the skies are no secret, but no one thinks of counting them.

Q. What is the present status of The Work in the rest of the world, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries?

A. Opus Dei feels as much at home in England as in Kenya, in Nigeria as in Japan, in the United States as in Austria, in Ireland as in Mexico or Argentina. In each place it is the same theological and pastoral phenomenon which takes root in the souls of the people of that country. It is not anchored in one particular culture nor in one specific historical period.

In the Anglo-Saxon world, thanks to God's help and the cooperation of many persons, Opus Dei has apostolic works of different types: Netherhall House in London, devoted especially to Afro-Asian students; Hudson Centre in Montreal, for the human and in-

tellectual formation of young women; Nairana Cultural Centre, for the students of Sydney. In the United States, where Opus Dei began to work in 1949, one could mention Midtown, a center for workers in the inner city of Chicago; Stonecrest Community Center in Washington, for the education of women who lack professional training; Trimount House, a university residence in Boston; etc.

One final remark: The Work's influence, so far as it exists in each case, will always be spiritual and of a religious nature, never a temporal one.

Q. Various sources assume that a solid enmity sets most religious orders, and especially the Jesuits, in opposition to Opus Dei. Do these rumors have any foundation at all, or are they one of those myths which people build up when they are not well acquainted with the problem?

A. We are not religious. We do not bear any resemblance to religious nor is there any authority on earth which could require us to be religious. Yet in Opus Dei we venerate and love the religious state. I pray every day that all venerable religious will continue to offer the Church the fruits of their virtues, their apostolic works, and their sanctity. The rumors you spoke of are just that — rumors. Opus Dei has always enjoyed the admiration and the sympathetic good will of religious of many orders and congregations, especially of cloistered monks and nuns, who pray for us, write us often, and make our work known in a thousand ways because they can appreciate the meaning of our life: contemplatives in the midst of the cares of the secular city.

The Secretary General of Opus Dei, Alvaro del Portillo, was close to and admired the last General of the Jesuits. With the present General, Father Arrupe, I am equally close and we think highly of each other.

Misunderstandings, if they should occur, would show a lack of Christian spirit, for our faith calls for unity, not rivalries or divisions.

Q. What is the position of The Work on the Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty, and especially on its application to Spain, where the "Castiella Project" is still suspended? And what about the alleged "integrist" for which Opus Dei has occasionally been reproached?

A. Integrist? Opus Dei is neither on the right nor on the left nor at the center. As a priest I strive to be with Christ. Both of His arms — not only one — were outstretched on the Cross. I freely take from every group whatever seems good to me and helps me to keep my heart and my two arms open to all mankind. And every member of Opus Dei is also utterly free,

within the bounds of the Christian faith, to choose whatever opinion he likes.

With respect to religious liberty, from its foundation Opus Dei has never practiced discrimination of any kind. It works and lives with everyone because it sees in each person a soul which must be respected and loved. These are not mere words. Our Work is the first Catholic organization which, with the authorization of the Holy See, admits non-Catholics, whether Christian or not, as Cooperators. I have always defended the freedom of individual consciences. I do not understand violence. It does not seem to be an apt way either to persuade or to conquer. Error is overcome by prayer, by God's grace, and by study; never by force; always with charity. From the first moment this is the spirit we have lived. You can understand, then, how the Council's teaching on this subject could only make me happy.

As to the specific project you refer to, it is not my problem to solve. It belongs to the Church's hierarchy in Spain and to the Catholics of that country. It is up to them to apply the Council's spirit to the particular case.

Q. Some readers of *The Way* are surprised by the statement in Point 29: "Matrimony is for the rank and file, not for the officers of Christ's army." Can that be taken as a disparaging appraisal of matrimony, which would go against The Work's desire to be inserted in the living realities of the modern world?

A. I advise you to read the previous point of *The Way*, which states that matrimony is a divine vocation. It was not at all frequent to hear this sort of affirmation around 1925.

The consequences you spoke of could only spring from a failure to understand my words. With that metaphor I wanted to recall what the Church has always taught about the excellence and supernatural value of apostolic celibacy. At the same time I wanted to remind all Christians that they must consider themselves *milites Christi* (soldiers of Christ), in St. Paul's words, members of the People of God who are engaged on earth in a divine warfare of understanding, sanctity, and peace. All over the world there are many thousands of married couples who belong to Opus Dei, or who live according to its spirit. And they are well aware that a soldier may be decorated for bravery in the same battle from which the general shamefully fled.

Q. You established your residence in Rome in 1946. What is there about the Pontiffs you have dealt with that stands out in your memory?

A. For me, in the hierarchy of love, the Pope comes right after the most holy Trinity and our Mother the Virgin.

I cannot forget that it was His Holiness Pius XII who approved Opus Dei at a time when more than one considered our way of spirituality a *heresy*. Nor can I forget that the first words of kindness and affection I received in Rome in 1946 came from the then Monsignor Montini. The affable and paternal charm of John XXIII, every time I had occasion to visit him, remains engraved in my memory. Once I told him: "In our Work all men, Catholics or not, have always been lovingly received. It is not from Your Holiness that I learned ecumenism." And Pope John laughed with obvious emotion.

What more could I tell you? The Roman Pontiffs, all of them, have always had understanding and affection for Opus Dei.

Q. Monsignor, I had the opportunity of listening to you answer the questions of an assembly of more than 2,000 persons gathered in Pamplona a year and a half ago. You insisted then on the necessity for Catholics to conduct themselves as responsible and free citizens, and "not to make a living by being Catholic." What importance and what scope do you give to that idea?

A. I have always been annoyed by the attitude of those who make a profession of *calling themselves Catholic*, and also of those who want to deny the principle of personal responsibility, upon which the whole Christian morality is based.

The spirit of Opus Dei and of its members is to serve the Church, and all creatures, without using the Church. I like Catholics to carry Christ not in name, but in their conduct, giving a real witness of Christian life. Clericalism repels me and I understand how, besides a bad anticlericalism, there also exists a healthy anticlericalism. It proceeds from love for the priesthood and opposes the use of a sacred mission for earthly ends, either by a layman or by a priest. But I do not think that in this I oppose myself to anyone. In our Work there is no spirit of monopoly. There is only the desire of cooperating with all who work for Christ, and with all — Christians or not — who make of their lives a splendid reality of service.

It remains only to say that the important thing is not so much the dimension I have given to these ideas, especially since 1928, but that which the magisterium of the Church has given them. Not long ago the Council stirred up in the poor priest that I am, an emotion which is impossible to describe. For it reminded all Christians, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, that they must feel their full citizenship in the earthly city — by taking part in all human undertakings with professional competence and with love for all men, by seeking that Christian perfection to which they are called by the simple fact of their Baptism.

Additional copies can be obtained from: Cooperators of Opus Dei, 7225 N. Greenview Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60626