

Leonard Chan

J. Stroup

Religious Studies 402.01

2 May 2006

The Truth of Opus Dei

Preface

This short essay covering Opus Dei is the product of research from the past several months. Although I do not reach the scope of John L. Allen Jr.'s Opus Dei in terms of thoroughness, I have attempted to give a balanced account on what is often termed as the “most controversial force in the Catholic Church” or as a “strange pastoral phenomenon.”¹ Interviews were conducted with Opus Dei members of different status as well as non-members from the archdiocese that work with Opus Dei. Literature from within the organization, including primary materials from Josemaría Escrivá, has been studied along with highly critical works by embittered ex-members and hard-line traditionalists. However, I have never attended an Opus Dei retreat nor have I ever fully immersed myself in an Opus Dei lifestyle. To say the least, I am not a member and have no personal stake in partaking in this project. Due to the restraints in time and space, pertinent issues such as profiles of prominent members and the actual works of Escrivá have been neglected in this discourse but not in the research.

The curiosity to uncover the Opus Dei mystique has not been limited to me. The presence of a supposedly controversial group in Rice University has sparked the attention of many Catholic students. Luis Cardinal Cipriani has eaten with students in the past year, and several Opus Dei members hold lectures on Christian Principles on campus grounds. Multitudes

¹ Both references refer to the subtitles used in the literature I have read through. The first was part of Allen's title for his Opus Dei book, and the other was the subtitle for the article found in The Angelus magazine.

of people, Catholic and non-Catholic, that learned about this project have requested a copy of the final product. Those that were interviewed will also receive copies. The paper will stray away from the traditional research paper format and will attempt to suit the general audience. Despite dissemination of this project, I do not plan to pull any punches. I do not believe covering up my findings will be conducive to anyone. This is simply my honest evaluation of one of the most unique Catholic movements of modern day.

Introduction

Due to Dan Brown's Da Vinci's Code, the group known as Opus Dei has risen to the public consciousness as both secular journalists and Catholic writers have attempted to understand this organization. However, controversy is nothing new to Opus Dei. Opus Dei has been engaged in a public relations battle on all fronts, even from within the Catholic Church, since its inception in 1928. Traditionalist Catholics have accused Opus Dei of being the driving force that led to the fiasco known as the Second Vatican Council. On the other end of the spectrum, Progressives believe Opus Dei wants the reversal of Vatican II and is too dogmatic for today's world. Even others have argued that Freemasonry or Talmudic Judaism has infiltrated Opus Dei. In any case, its critics understand Opus Dei as "a real Trojan horse at the heart of the Church."²

For the most part, Opus Dei did not refute these claims not because the allegations are true but because it was unnecessary. Being able to withstand such criticism is considered a blessing as members were suffering for the vocation that God has given them. The Gospels also commend suffering for what is right as Matthew records, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be

glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”³ However, this silence was misinterpreted as secrecy or as confirmation of the allegations. In its early years, supposed ally Francisco Franco ordered an investigation into Opus Dei to see if the charges of it being a Masonic cult were true. The Italians did the same in 1986 as part of an investigation into secret societies. As a result of this investigation, future Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro concluded, “Opus Dei is secret neither in law nor in fact.”⁴ Furthermore, several bishops reacted with suspicion and strict regulations including Basil Cardinal Hume of Westminster. Thus, Opus Dei’s strategy to simply turn the other cheek seemed to backfire as criticism inhibited its members from achieving their duty in “seeking holiness in daily life.” According to outside observers, Opus Dei has changed over the years. Very few of its actual practices have been altered, but its willingness to defend itself through patient explanations has become a new feature of Opus Dei. Opus Dei and its members have learned that they have little to fear for being candid.

Opus Dei continues to be a key player in the Catholic Church although not as hegemonic as the mass media or others make it to be. Understanding the spirit and essence of what Escrivá believed to be God’s Work is vital to understanding the dynamism of contemporary Catholicism. Four broad topics will be covered in this investigation: the founder Josemaría Escrivá, the structure and practices of Opus Dei, the profile of members of Opus Dei, and relations with other groups within the Church. Inevitably, all four of these areas are intricately tied together. Members have a strong devotion to Escrivá as the members are organized by the Opus Dei

² This quote is found in “Opus Dei: A Strange Pastoral Phenomenon.” *The Angelus*. Sept. 1995: 14. The magazine conveys a strongly anti-Vatican II sentiment and condemns Josemaría Escrivá for introducing modernist tendencies within the Catholic Church.

³ Matthew 5:11-12.

⁴ Allen, John L. Jr., *Opus Dei*, (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 136.

structure. Opus Dei is the creation of Escrivá, who has his share of run-ins with ecclesiastical figures and other religious groups.

Josemaría Escrivá

José María Julián Mariano was born on 9 January 1902 in the Aragon region of Spain. He would later combine his first two names to Josemaría to emphasize the closeness of Joseph and Mary. In his infancy, Escrivá fell extremely ill, but his illness left him after his mother sought the intercession of Our Lady of Torrecuidad at an ancient shrine. Between Christmas of 1917 and Epiphany of 1918, Escrivá had the first of many mystical experiences, which “filled his heart to serve God.”⁵ As a result, Escrivá felt that he had a vocation to the priesthood at an early age but hesitated as he was the only child of the family and was expected to care for his family’s well-being. Once his brother Santiago was born in 1919, he no longer had any qualms in joining the priesthood. He excelled as a seminarian until he was ordained on 28 March 1925 at the age of 23. He then moved to Madrid in 1927 to earn a doctorate in civil law and to begin his priestly career. While in Madrid, Escrivá ministered to the poor and the sick as he lived on meager means.

On the Feast for the Guardian Angels on 2 October 1928, Escrivá received another vision, arguably the most important. As the bells rang, Escrivá believed he saw the vision in which God revealed to him Opus Dei. From that point on, his life’s work was Opus Dei, God’s Work. Controversy almost immediately followed Opus Dei’s founding. The focus on the sanctification of the lives of the laity brought charges that Escrivá was anticlerical. Spanish Jesuit Angel Carillo de Albornoz accused Escrivá of creating a “secretive, heretical society of a Masonic camp.”⁶ Other segments of the Spanish hierarchy also positioned themselves against Escrivá’s

⁵ Allen, John L. Jr., *Opus Dei*, (New York: Doubleday, 2005) 46.

⁶ Allen, 135.

movement due to the revolutionary nature of Opus Dei. Their efforts were fruitless as Opus Dei gained all the necessary approvals from the Vatican by 1943.

Even as Escrivá became increasingly popular, his personality came under attack. Outsiders believed he felt overly self-conscious about his social status. Hence, he adopted and emphasized “de Balaguer” in his name. A bit more controversial was his application to the Spanish Ministry of Justice for the title of Marquis of Peralta. However, he only did so after consulting Spanish bishops residing both in Spain and in the Vatican. Archbishop Arcadio Larraona Saralegui, the prefect of the Congregation of Rites, convinced Escrivá that claiming the title was more than a right as there was a “duty to claim the title.”⁷ Escrivá also recognized that as the eldest child in the family only he can lay claim to the title even if it was intended to be passed on to his younger brother, who received the title within four years. Escrivá was simply exercising his rights as a citizen rather than being vain. In fact in his monumental work The Way, Escrivá devotes entire chapters to humility and poverty.⁸

As the conduit between God and the world in realizing the formation of Opus Dei, Josemaría Escrivá enjoyed the reverence of his members. Father Michael Barrett, the chaplain of the Houston Downtown Chapel and former head of Opus Dei’s branch in Texas, explained, “It was his spirit that guided the foundation of the organization and how to bring holiness as a model into reality.”⁹ Yet, many individuals including Catholics have difficulty in referring to an individual as “the Father.” Due to Escrivá’s adherence for the Church’s Magisterium and his respect for the personal freedom of Opus Dei members, Escrivá was seen as a father figure. Furthermore, previous founders of religious orders also have the personal magnetism that Escrivá

⁷ Allen, 56.

⁸ The Way is a collection of 999 sayings that are written in proverb form organized in 46 chapters and used for meditations. It covers subjects from character to study to the communion of saints.

continues to enjoy. St. Dominic receives special attention from Dominicans, St. Francis of Assisi from Franciscans, and St. Ignatius of Loyola by the Jesuits. As the founder of Opus Dei, he has a special relationship with members. Yet, the devotion to other saints is maintained despite the focus on Escrivá. For example, supernumerary Maritza Roman said, “I still have devotion to others like Saint Jude but with different feelings.”¹⁰ However, former members often decried that a cult of personality surrounded Escrivá, and they felt that they were forced to comply with that mindset. In an environment where everyone else has a genuine outpouring affection for an individual, those that are not naturally inclined to do so will undoubtedly feel pressure.

The beatification and canonization of Josemaría Escrivá provided institutional legitimization for the devotion of the Opus Dei founder. The rapidness of the process nonetheless raised eyebrows. Many critics argue that nearly 40% of the testimony came from Escrivá’s direct successors: Alvaro del Portillo and Javier Echevarría. Harsh critics of Opus Dei including former Venezuelan directress Maria del Carmen Tapia were barred from the hearings. Also adding to the controversy was the absence of the devil’s advocate, who traditionally scrutinizes the cause for sainthood the most. According to the traditionalists, no canonization is valid without such an office. The canonization in their eyes was a feeble attempt by Pope John Paul II (or for some, Anti-Pope John Paul II) to legitimize Vatican II, which is seen as an atrocity. Only by the canonization of one of its forerunners can John Paul II hope to give the appearance that Vatican II is legitimate. Likewise, the progressive wing of Catholics accuse Opus Dei and the conservatives in engaging in Vatican political intrigue to speed up the process

⁹ Personal interview with Fr. Michael Barrett. Fr. Barrett has also been a frequent spokesperson for Opus Dei on television programs including the Today Show and Good Morning America. He spent ten years in Gulf Oil before being incardinated as an Opus Dei numerary priest.

¹⁰ Personal interview with Maritza Roman. Roman currently works for the Family Life Ministry in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston. As a supernumerary, she is married with children.

to shore up even more support for their outdated dogmatic agenda. According to them, Opus Dei was able to use its financial resources to get the desired result.

The new policies regarding canonizations under Pope John Paul II greatly benefited the case for Josemaría Escrivá. The process was streamlined as the position of devil's advocate was eliminated for cases for canonization in 1983. Escrivá was not the only one who benefited from of the new system. A record numbers of saints at a record pace were canonized under John Paul II's reign. Escrivá was also simply one of many who experienced relatively quick beatifications and canonizations on a list that includes Padre Pio, "El Pele," Carlos Manuel Rodriguez, and others. Escrivá also did not enjoy special exceptions such as the elimination of the five-year waiting period after an individual's death before the process can start, which was done for Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Furthermore, liberal cardinals came out in public support for Escrivá including Cardinals Franz König and Carlo Maria Martini. Both shared a reputation in opposing conservative movements within the Church. The exclusion of key witnesses was the tribunal's decision rather than Opus Dei's. In fact, former numerary Maria del Carmen Tapia claimed those that expected damning evidence from her would have been surprised. Opus Dei did not ram Escrivá through the beatification and canonization process but provided the research and resources for the process to run smoothly.

Although Escrivá is a canonized saint, he is also human. He could not always understand and solve all the crises that surrounded him nor was he immune from falling victim to the self-interested maneuvers of those around him. His sternness was at times interpreted as needless anger, and he was at times genuinely angry. The issue is thus determining which of his actions and thoughts were his own and those that were inspired by God. Sometimes members could not properly make the distinction. Making a mistake on this issue for any individual, may it be a saint like Escrivá or a madman like Hitler, could indeed lead to tragedy. Nevertheless, Opus Dei

has accomplished much as the Holy See's "mobile corps" in serving the poor and teaching doctrine throughout the world.

Structure and Practices

Each person answered the question on what group Opus Dei resembles the most in a different manner. Benedictine Father Justin Price said that they are a lay version of the Jesuits. Fr. Barrett claimed that Opus Dei resembles a local parish or diocese. Roman said she has heard others compare it to the Legionaries, but she has never personally reflected on the question. Likewise, Dr. William J. Cork, head of campus ministry for the archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, stated that Opus Dei is "one of a kind."

As one of the first Catholic organizations that have focused on the lay, Opus Dei is indeed unique. It must be understood that Opus Dei is not a religious order, and Opus Dei's insistence that it is not called by name is more than debating over the semantics. A religious order implies that it is an order of priests. This would be incorrect in since 98% of its membership is laypersons. The status of secular institute was granted to Opus Dei on 16 June 1950. Partly due to the stipulations associated with this status, Opus Dei was careful in separating the men's and women's branches of Opus Dei. Yet, this status was still deficient in describing this novel organization. Thus, it became a personal prelature on 28 November 1982. The personal prelature status indicates that Opus Dei should be considered as a non-territorial diocese. To be part of this personal prelature, an individual engages in a contract to do so rather than simply living in a geographic region. The Prelate of Opus Dei is thus equivalent to the bishop of a typical diocese. Along with the obligation to follow the prelate, members are still expected to be active participants within the diocese.

Opus Dei remains to be the only personal prelature in the Catholic Church. However, this should not be interpreted as a sign of Roman Curia favor as its uniqueness is coincidental

rather than substantial. The Opus Dei spirit would not be diminished if the pope grants the same status on another group. However, another group first has to emerge that requires the same canon law framework for another personal prelature to be formed. Roman stated, “There is not history of another movement – a lay movement – with the same legal principles Josemaría had in mind.”¹¹ Other organizations that have considered it as a possibility have yet to express the necessary desire and reasons to gain the personal prelature status. Opus Dei members are by no means hostile to the idea of other groups joining them either. Pablo Yepes, a numerary from Rice University, is actually hopeful that another personal prelature will come into existence in the future.¹² Fr. Barrett even speculated that the Episcopalian converts to Catholicism may be the next group to form a personal prelature.

The internal structure of Opus Dei is led by the prelate, currently Javier Echevarría, and has two personal assistants. The prelate is only position that has a life term. The prelate also leads the General Council, which is the men’s branch. The Central Advisory Council, which is the women’s branch, is currently led by Marlies Kücking. Each branch has a regional delegate in each country in which Opus Dei has a presence. The two branches are distinctly separate. The structure of the regional governments of Opus Dei mirrors that of Opus Dei as a whole. As it stands currently, sixty-two countries have at least one Opus Dei center. Centers are the local focal points for Opus Dei. A center is exclusively one gender or the other and is led by a layperson director.

Opus Dei classifies its members in four different groups. Seventy percent of the 85,491 members are supernumeraries. These members are often married, and there are no requirements for the spouse to also be a member. They use the services provided by Opus Dei such as retreats,

¹¹ Personal interview with Maritiza Roman.

¹² Yepes is a Senior Faculty Fellow in the Physics and Astronomy department at Rice University.

spiritual direction, and confession; but, they remain active in their own parish life. Like supernumeraries, numeraries can hold jobs in the secular world but can also fully devote themselves to Opus Dei. They also have deeper obligations and commitments to Opus Dei, and thus, are trusted with the leadership positions in the prelature. Likewise, the most reported cases of disillusionment also come from this sector. They also lead a life of celibacy. Numerary assistants are a group of women whose role is limited to household duties. Their spiritual formation is also led by the numeraries. Associates are celibate members that hold the same responsibilities of numeraries but do not stay at an Opus Dei center.

Members, especially numeraries, are expected to engage in a life of piety including daily Mass, daily examination of conscience, daily rosary, as well as corporal mortification. Corporal mortification is the practice that catches the eye of outsiders. However, even embittered ex-members see the practice of corporal mortification as among the least of their complaints. The practice was common in the pre-conciliar days, and some communities continue the practice, including Opus Dei. The objective is two-fold. The first is to “awaken a sense of penitence and a desire to make things right.”¹³ The other is to imitate Christ’s suffering at the Passion. Corporal mortification can vary from simply using cold water in the shower to using a cilice, a spiked band, around an individual’s leg. Opus Dei members may also use a discipline to whip themselves during prayer. As stated before, Opus Dei is not alone of the religious communities, and in fact does not even use the most extreme forms of corporal mortification. For example, Opus Dei only uses a cilice with only one band of spikes while other groups may use cilices with up to three bands of spikes. Although its appearance is quite imposing, a cilice when used properly reportedly causes the same amount of physical pain as running a mile. Of course, misuse of the discipline or cilice can cause significant problems. This is possible especially if

one believes that greater suffering leads to greater piety. Corporal mortification is not dinnertime conversation among Opus Dei members. Opus Dei members consider it a private matter like penance after a confession. In the past, members may have not known about the cilice and discipline until they are incorporated into Opus Dei. However, members are now open about the practice to prospective members and answer questions regarding corporal mortification if asked.

Opus Dei provides assistance in universities, student centers, and medical clinics. It also helps run centers for development in disadvantaged areas. However, works such as these frequently are not clearly seen as Opus Dei operations. Opus Dei members once thought that marking such operations as Opus Dei-affiliated detracts from the purpose of such activities. Outsiders would focus more on a school's affiliation rather than what it is supposed to do. Such a move would also be considered as an act of self-righteousness as Opus Dei actively seeks to avoid the spotlight. Furthermore, such outward identification is seen as unnecessary. Just as an Opus Dei school feels that it does not need to tout its Opus Dei's affiliation, high schools in Houston do not feel it is necessary to publicize that it is accredited by the Southern Association of Secondary Schools. The information is available if an individual decides to look. However, the mystery of whether a corporate work is affiliated with Opus Dei has proven to be a strong distraction in itself. Thus, information is now more forthcoming than before.

The most distinct practice of Opus Dei and the core of its spirituality is the sanctification of one's daily life. Every act in one's life is to be dedicated to God. Hence, daily work must be done with the greatest possible effort as that too is an offering to God. Work is no longer an obstacle but is instead a part of man's mission. For Opus Dei members, there is no division between one's personal and professional lives. Despite the holistic view, members do not openly advertise their status as members. Both Pablo Yepes and Maritza Roman admitted that they do

¹³ Allen, 170.

not find it necessary to list their status as Opus Dei members on their resumes. Opus Dei formed their personal spiritual life. Nonetheless, personal beliefs should have influence on professional ethics but only in a subtle, natural sense. Only when a relationship naturally develops such issues including Opus Dei, or religion in general, is discussed.

Members were once bound to secrecy to prevent them from using their status as a means for personal gain. Now, members decide whether to disclose their status. No full list of members has been published, simply because none exists even within Opus Dei. Yet, there has been absolutely no difficulties in learning which individuals are members or not. Opus Dei members only congregate for retreats and spiritual formation. However, these activities are open to all that are interested. Thus, individuals are rumored to be part of Opus Dei even if they have no interest in joining. For example, Antonin Scalia and Robert Novak may have had contact with an Opus Dei priest, but they are not members. Similarly, a student that seeks spiritual direction from a Benedictine monk may have little interest in becoming a Benedictine himself. Furthermore, to emphasize that open displays of piety are not necessary for holiness, Opus Dei does not organize massive public processions or act as a collective group in public. The vestiges of old guidelines and a low-key mentality are often misconstrued for the much heralded, yet misreported, secrecy of the organization.

Nevertheless, the focus on work has come under attack. Some may argue that true sanctification of one's life is only possible by withdrawing from the world and focusing on meditation and prayer. Work, especially tasks that are engaged in the secular world, inhibit an individual from leaning on more traditional forms of piety. Others decry that Opus Dei's interpretation of Genesis 2:15, which states, "Then the LORD God took the man and put him into the garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it," to sanctify work is not the Church's traditional interpretation. Since this is the biblical underpinning of Opus Dei's central charism, critics

charge that Opus Dei is based on false grounds and is thus illegitimate. Other implications on the focus of the “sanctification of work” are covered in the next section.

Membership

Opus Dei is not universal in terms of geography but also universal in terms socio-economics and politics. Members can be found at all levels of society in all ethnic and gender groups. Fr. Barrett is proud of this diversity as “diversity shows that it (Opus Dei) is a work of God.”¹⁴ Yepes also testified to the wide ranging diversity of the organization: “In Houston there are members who spend their days driving a truck around the state, along with medical doctors, people working at Taco Bell, and business managers.”¹⁵ Members are also given significant latitude in terms of politics. Hence, there is no such thing as a stereotypical member of Opus Dei. According to Fr. Price, members can be short or tall, young or old, and single or married. What unites members according to Yepes is “[members’] effort to do their work well and find God in it.”¹⁶

“We are not out there fishing for members,” claimed Roman. The lack of active recruiting is attuned to Opus Dei’s desire to slip under the radar and its aversion to attract attention. To battle the vocations crisis that affects all branches of the Catholic Church, many dioceses and religious orders use recruiting posters and pamphlets. Opus Dei does not. Majority of its members realize that demands of non-stop work ethic and prayer life is not designed for everyone. Rather than recruiting members, Opus Dei attracts members. Father Barrett recalled, “Opus Dei was appealing in being a layperson while serving the Church.”¹⁷ One did not need to leave the rest of the world to be holy. However, the refusal to withdraw from the world has

¹⁴ Personal interview with Barrett.

¹⁵ E-mail interview with Pablo Yepes.

¹⁶ E-mail interview with Yepes.

¹⁷ Personal interview with Barrett.

drawn criticism by those who claim that the secular world and religious life can never be reconciled. Joining Opus Dei is considered a vocation, which must be taken as a serious matter with careful thought. Legal safeguards prevent individuals not geared for the prelature from joining Opus Dei. For example, there is an age requirement in expressing a desire to join. An individual must also partake in the oblation, a trial period. In the oblation, they are full-fledged members but this contract with Opus Dei must be renewed every year on March 19, the feast of Saint Joseph. After five years, a member can make the lifetime commitment called the "fidelity." If an individual wishes to leave after this point, he is asked to write a letter to the prelate expressing his intentions. Understandably, not everyone that leaves follows this procedure. However, in practice, there are times in which an individual feels pressured to join. Some members, so enthralled by the spirituality of Opus Dei, may believe that Opus Dei is the only work of God, and it thus becomes necessary to bring everyone else into the prelature.

In any case, Opus Dei does not target the rich and powerful for its ranks. However, Opus Dei members can be affluent and may be found frequently near college campuses like Rice University. However, what is often considered Opus Dei money is not made by the organization, but by its members. They are financially successful due to their emphasis on the "sanctification of work" to God. Thus, members are driven by their spirituality to put utmost effort in their professional life. The "1982 Statutes of Opus Dei" states, "[Members need to have a] constant effort to acquire and perfect the necessary professional formation."¹⁸ Furthermore, numeraries are required to have or be able to obtain a college or professional degree due to the intellectual demands of ministering to the formation needs of others. Although a minority in Opus Dei, they are perhaps the most visible. Since these members maintain a normal professional life, their

education also helps them achieve. Once successful, members become connected with others that are also successful. In short, they have Catholicized Max Weber's Protestant work ethic. However, the work itself rather than the results of it are personally valued. An Italian numerary explained, worldly success does not "prove our election by God."¹⁹ Instead, the "sanctification of work" is seen as a means to serve others through the labor itself and through its rewards. Hence, Opus Dei members are likely to donate large amounts of their personal earnings back to the church. Despite the accusations by the Opus Dei Awareness Network, Opus Dei does not force its members to surrender their paychecks. Instead, the Statutes of Opus Dei encourages members "to contribute generously [. . .] according to his personal circumstances" after the needs of himself and his family are ensured.²⁰

Some members may see that genuine hard work engenders success and support free-market policies, while others realize that such a strict mentality towards work is not built for everyone and state intervention is the best method to economically support society. Both economic philosophies are acceptable under Opus Dei. In fact, Opus Dei explicitly respects the freedom of conscience. Through its statutes, "all professional, family, social, political, and financial activities" do not fall under its jurisdiction.²¹ Thus, members can have different, and even, opposing political ideologies. Critics from the traditionalist wing then charge that Opus Dei places freedom before the truth. However, Opus Dei emphasizes that personal freedom should not be distorted and must be in-line with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Issues such as abortion are not seen as political issues to be debated but fundamental moral issues. This approach draws fire from the progressives who argue that Catholic policies themselves should be

¹⁸ The "1982 Statutes of Opus Dei" are not officially translated into English. The highly critical Opus Dei Awareness Network translated the document. The document is a dry, internal document that has little or anything at all that would be considered controversial. "1982 Statutes of Opus Dei," 3S1P2.

¹⁹ Allen, 89.

²⁰ "1982 Statutes of Opus Dei," 3S1P2.

changed instead of being blindly followed. Others accuse Opus Dei's silence on political issues as a sign of approval for unjust regimes.

Opus Dei has been accused of supporting the Franco regime in Spain. Undoubtedly, the majority of Opus Dei members supported Franco during the Spanish Civil War. Franco may have had totalitarian tendencies but the Republican side was openly anticlerical. They expressed this sentiment not just through proclamations but also through bullets as many priests and bishops were killed. In fact, almost all Catholics unabashedly supported Franco during his reign. What links Opus Dei with the Franco regime was the appointment of Opus Dei members as his finance and commerce ministers in February 1957. He chose these members because Opus Dei had the reputation of being "deeply devout and loyal to the Church" and "pledged to seek a life of Christian perfection."²² These new ministers were experts in their field and pushed through a stabilization and liberalization plan that sparked Spanish economic growth. Due to the sweeping reforms and their tenure in office, Opus Dei seemed to be the powerful force behind the regime. However, the assumption that Opus Dei as an organization was the engine behind Franco lacks logic. Such a claim would be similar to saying the United States Supreme Court is controlled by the Catholic Church with five of the nine members (none are Opus Dei) being Catholic. Furthermore, Escrivá had only limited contact with Franco. As other Catholic groups pushed for democratization, Opus Dei remained silent as it did in the past. No official stance was made as Opus Dei members were given the freedom to choose which side to support, which they did. Many members were among the earliest protestors against Franco while others continued to support the regime publicly. Opus Dei's political neutrality was further illustrated by Escrivá's

²¹ Pellitero, R., "Opus Dei," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2d. ed. Vol. 10. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 617.

²² Hitchcock, William I., *The Struggle for Europe*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 272.

refusal to use Opus Dei as a building stone for a Spanish Christian Democratic Party despite pressure from Cardinal Benelli of the Roman Curia.

Opus Dei also does not discriminate on who it helps or who helps it. Opus Dei is the first Catholic organization to accept help from non-Catholics and non-Christians for their apostolic works. Escrivá preached that if God the Father was the creator of all, all individuals should be considered brothers and sisters through the Father. Hence, Opus Dei recognized that an individual's worth is not in their religious belief, and a common cause can link individuals of different faiths. This ecumenical policy predated Vatican II and Pope John Paul II. Thus, some expressed the concern that Opus Dei was leading to the "internal disintegration of the Church."²³ They charge that Popes Pius X, Pius XI, and Pius XII had condemned the inclusion of non-Catholics in Catholic activities. Since Opus Dei is reluctant to proselytize, these critics charge that working alongside "protestants, schismatic, Jewish, Muslim, and pagan" corrupts the "idea of true religion."²⁴ Thus, Opus Dei may be bordering on religious relativism. However, the statutes of Opus Dei state, "All the faithful of the Prelature, by prayer, sacrifice, and conversation, thus ought to work with these Cooperators, in order that, by intercession of the Virgin Mary and by the divine mercy, the unfailing light might be brought to them and that they might officially and gently come to Christian ways."²⁵ Opus Dei provides spiritual formation to its cooperators. The unwavering adherence to the Church's Magisterium also testifies to the fact that Opus Dei's fidelity to the Catholic Church has not been compromised. On the other hand, a danger exists that non-Catholics may create a pressure group that negatively influences an Opus Dei center. Yet, others have criticized Opus Dei for being intolerant against other religions. A recent Vatican document, in which an Opus Dei member helped compose, reaffirmed the idea

²³ "Opus Dei: A Strange Pastoral Phenomenon," 17.

²⁴ "Opus Dei: A Strange Pastoral Phenomenon," 18.

that only Catholicism is in the fullness of truth while other Christian denominations are found lacking.

Like any organization, Opus Dei loses members. Unlike a private company, the connection with Opus Dei is far stronger as the spiritual direction encompasses the entirety of the individual. Furthermore, no one denies that a person is changed after being in Opus Dei. The question is whether this change has been for the better, especially if a member leaves. Allen cites multiple cases in which members maintain on good terms with Opus Dei and simply realize a good fit no longer existed. Fr. Barrett also is acquainted with a handful of former members who have a “great affection and gratitude to Opus Dei” and had “some regret in abandoning the Work.”²⁶ In fact, Roman was formerly a numerary “but realized it was not my vocation.”²⁷ Her experience was positive enough that within two years of leaving, she became a supernumerary. Nonetheless, numeraries leaving an environment that was the central part of their life will have some psychological dissonance. This would only be exacerbated if a member stayed longer than necessary or felt trapped by the demands that are part of the Opus Dei professional and spiritual ethic. Hence, these are the former members that tend to be the most outspoken. They feel that they have a personal stake in alerting others of their criticisms of Opus Dei. On the other hand, former members that have successfully made the transition into regular life have no affinity in either direction in speaking about Opus Dei in public. In any case, Opus Dei members feel sadness for those that leave because they abandoned a life that they believe is fulfilling. Yet, they continue to have compassion and love for former members.

The departure of Maria del Carmen Tapia illustrates that Josemaría Escrivá and his personal prelature are not immune to the influences of personal ambitions. While still a member,

²⁵ “1982 Statutes of Opus Dei,” 16S2.

²⁶ Personal interview with Barrett.

Tapia developed a feud with Marlies Kücking. Perhaps, Kücking believed that Tapia was rising in the ranks of Opus Dei unwarranted, and she stood in her way to become the head of Opus Dei's women's branch. Kücking became suspicious of Tapia and may have genuinely believed that Tapia corrupted the priests of Opus Dei including Fr. Raimundo Pannikar. She thus convinced Escrivá of her suspicions, who in turn vented his displeasure to Tapia. After being placed under house arrest, Tapia was forced out of Opus Dei. Tapia was caught off guard by Escrivá's anger and resented the continual stream of slanders levied against her. She initially blamed Opus Dei as a whole as well as Escrivá, but following his canonization, she stated that she harbored no resentment toward Escrivá. However, a public reconciliation between Tapia and Opus Dei remains to be seen.

There has been a history of uneasiness of families allowing their children to enter the prelature. The exception of course is if someone's family already has links to Opus Dei. The most public case is of Dianne and Tammy DiNicola, which sparked the creation of the Opus Dei Awareness Network. The DiNicola family resented that Opus Dei kept Tammy away from her family as well as encouraging her to not talk about Opus Dei. After consulting specialists, her mother Dianne DiNicola came to the conclusion that Opus Dei had all the characteristics of cult and thus created the website to warn others. In its past, Opus Dei did in fact discourage its members from disclosing their membership even to family members. There is no question that many families have been uneasy about their children entering religious life or the seminary. Since membership does not necessarily entail a complete change in career, Opus Dei believed that it could avert the family conflict by simply avoiding it. This lack of openness backfired. Families inevitably discovered the truth and became increasingly hostile and resentful for this.

²⁷ Personal interview with Roman.

Now, Opus Dei encourages prospective members to speak openly to their families. This is one of many examples how Opus Dei opened up and learned how to handle skepticism.

Relations with the Rest of the Church

The early years of Opus Dei were especially tumultuous when dealing with the other sectors of the Catholic Church as described in Escrivá's abbreviated biography above. During Pope Paul VI's reign, Escrivá developed a distaste for the Roman Curia due to Cardinal Benelli's pressure to establish a Christian Democratic Party. According to Tapia, Opus Dei discouraged numeraries from attending papal general audiences, and Escrivá referred to Paul VI as an "old Jesuit" (and John XXIII as a "hick").²⁸ She was also given instructions by Escrivá to "pray for the next pope, who will have to mend many things."²⁹ Escrivá may have not enjoyed a strong friendship with Paul VI, but he remained publicly loyal to the pope. He had a high respect to the papacy as an institution. Prior to the election of Paul VI, Escrivá proclaimed, "Even if the man elected pope were to come from a tribe of savages with rings in his nose and ears, I would immediately throw myself at his feet and tell him the entire Work is at his unconditional service."³⁰ Furthermore, some critics even charge that the relationship between Paul VI and Escrivá was too cozy. Paul VI's decision to establish Opus Dei as a secular institution was seen as an act of collusion against the legacy of Pius XII and all of his predecessors. The accusations of enjoying a favored status grew under Pope John Paul II. However, when the statistics are reviewed, Opus Dei has a comparable share of Curia offices relative to other religious orders.

The rest of the Catholic Church has improved its relations with Opus Dei over the years. Even their supposed archrivals the Jesuits are now on good terms with the prelature. According to Father Mark E. Thibodeaux, a Jesuit from Stake Jesuit in Houston, the relationship can be

²⁸ Tapia, María del Carmen. *Beyond the Threshold: A Life in Opus Dei*. (New York: Continuum, 1997), 269.

²⁹ Tapia, 313

visualized as two priests shoulder-to-shoulder giving confessions to individuals facing opposite directions. Different priests have different perspectives but have the same mission. Fr. Barrett reiterated that there is a friendship and mutual support for other groups and an “eagerness to see the others prosper.” Furthermore, he stated that there is “not competitiveness” and “no intrinsic conflict.”³¹ The relationship of Opus Dei with individual dioceses, or in the case of Houston, archdioceses, is no exception.

To avoid gaining the ire of the archdiocese, Opus Dei statutes stipulate that the only priests that it can ordain must come from the ranks of its numeraries. This prevents accusations that Opus Dei poaches vocations from archdiocesan seminaries. Archdiocesan priests are permitted to become affiliated with Opus Dei through the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross but they are told that they cannot neglect their duties to the diocese. They must also “exhibit no secrecy” and “to do nothing without the bishop” as well as not “be distinguished in any way from their brother priests.”³² The archbishop must also approve any facility built by Opus Dei in his territory.

According to Cork, the “bishops have been very supportive of Opus Dei” in the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston.³³ Opus Dei first came into Houston in 1983 under the direction of numerary priest Jack Solarski. The original Opus Dei center in Houston was in the house next to the current Catholic Student Center of Rice University. After two years, the center was moved to the Chaucer Center in the Rice Village. In the summer of 1999, Bishop Joseph Fiorenza invited Opus Dei to run a parish, but the Downtown Catholic Chapel’s chaplain retired. Fr. Michael Barrett was asked to take this position instead. In recent years, Bishop Fiorenza

³⁰ Allen, 62.

³¹ Personal Interview with Barrett.

³² “1982 Statutes of Opus Dei,” 69P2-69P4.

³³ Personal interview with William J. Cork.

supported the selection of Opus Dei priest Jose H. Gomez for Archbishop of San Antonio.³⁴ The archdiocese does not know how many members are in its territory because it simply has never asked. Throughout the years, members received their formation from Opus Dei as they actively participate in parish life throughout Galveston-Houston without advertising their membership. Opus Dei aids a parish priest by providing spiritual direction and teaching classes. This allows the parish priest to concentrate on administering the sacraments. The governance of Opus Dei also remained in close communication with the bishops and has been in active collaboration with the archdiocese's programs. However, some offices of the archdiocese work closer with Opus Dei than the others.

The campus ministry office is among those that are well-connected with Opus Dei. At Rice University, there has been "quite a lot" of interaction between Opus Dei and the students. Fr. Justin Price, the chaplain at Rice and the Texas Medical Center, said that Opus Dei has made a positive contribution to the campus ministry program. In the past several years, members including J.L. Marti and Pablo Yepes have conducted weekly lectures on Christian Principles. They have not focused on Opus Dei as an organization nor have they emphasized the aspects of their spirituality that is exclusive to them. Although there is oversight over their programs, Fr. Price stated, "The members of Opus Dei won't do anything I will be opposed to." He also said, "There are students interested in Opus Dei," but Opus Dei members have "not tried to tap people on the shoulder asking them to join."³⁵ On a broader scale, Opus Dei may have been overambitious on American universities in the past. Nevertheless, the Catholic Campus Ministry Association executive director Ed Franchi stated that there are very little complaints about Opus Dei in recent years. However, he also claimed, "Several other Catholic organizations with

³⁴ Archbishop Gomez was invited to partake in an interview. However, he said that his participation in Opus Dei has waned and would not be knowledgeable enough to discuss the current state of Opus Dei.

campus outreach have developed in those ten years, and the questions and concerns we hear about them are much greater.”³⁶

Conclusion

Opus Dei continues to be the center of a maelstrom especially with the upcoming release of The Da Vinci Code, which falsely represents what the prelature represents on all counts. Although some of the criticism has subsided as Opus Dei has become more open, it continues to have its share of its critics. Progressives dismiss Opus Dei for blindly clinging onto the Church’s Magisterium. Traditionalists denounce Opus Dei for its religious relativism. The rank-and-file Catholic only understands Opus Dei through the eyes of the mass media, which only gives part of the story. Thus, uncertainty ensues. However, Catholicism in itself continues to be criticized. Fr. Barrett recalled that he was never discriminated for being an Opus Dei member, but was discriminated simply because he was Catholic.

³⁵ Personal interview with Justin Price.

³⁶ Allen, 365.

Bibliography

- Allen, John L. Jr. Opus Dei. New York: Doubleday, 2005.
- Barrett, Michael. Personal Interview. 17 Feb. 2006.
- Biema, David Van. "The Ways of Opus Dei." Time 24 Apr. 2006: 52-60.
- Cork, William J. Personal Interview. 21 Feb. 2006.
- Escrivá, Josemaría. Holy Rosary. Josemaría Escrivá: A Website Dedicated to the Writings of Opus Dei's Founder. Studium Foundation. 2 Apr. 2006.
<http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/the_way>.
- Escrivá, Josemaría. The Way. Josemaría Escrivá: A Website Dedicated to the Writings of Opus Dei's Founder. Studium Foundation. 2 Apr. 2006.
<http://www.escrivaworks.org/book/the_way>.
- Hertel, Peter. "Opus Dei." The Encyclopedia of Christianity. Ed. Fahlbusch, et al. Vol. 3. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Hitchcock, William I. The Struggle for Europe. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. 272, 274.
- Hughes, John Jay. "The Facts and Fiction About Opus Dei." National Catholic Reporter 21 Oct. 2005. The National Catholic Reporter Publishing. 1 May 2006.
<http://ncronline.org/NCR_Online/archives2/2005d/102105/102105p.htm>.
- Klaiber, Jeffrey. The Church, Dictatorships, and Democracy in Latin America. New York: Orbis, 1998.
- Marti, J.L. "Ordinary Catholics and Vocation to Holiness: Opus Dei's Message and Mission." Catholicism 201. Catholic Student Association. Martel College, Houston. 27 Jan. 2006.
- Martin, James. "Opus Dei in the United States." America 25 Feb. 1995.
- Miranda, Carolina A. "Disenchante by Blind Obedience." Time 24 Apr. 2006. 58.
- Miranda, Carolina A. "Living Out Her Faith Every Day." Time 24 Apr. 2006: 61.

Opus Dei. 1982 Statutes of Opus Dei: Latin and English. 1982. Trans. Opus Dei Awareness Network. 30 Apr. 2006. <http://odan.org/statutes_1982.htm>.

Opus Dei Alert. 2005. St. Gemma Web Productions Inc. 30 Apr. 2006. <<http://www.opusdeialert.com>>.

Opus Dei Awareness Network. 2006. Opus Dei Awareness Network, Inc. 30 Apr. 2006. <<http://odan.org>>.

Opus Dei. Seeking Holiness in Daily Life: An Introduction to the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei. New York, Opus Dei.

“Opus Dei: A Strange Pastoral Phenomenom.” The Angelus Sept. 1995.

Pellitero, R. “Opus Dei.” New Catholic Encyclopedia. 2d. ed. Vol. 10. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

Price, Justin. Personal Interview. 8 Mar. 2006.

Roman, Maritza. Personal Interview. 7 Mar. 2006.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá Bulletin. New York: Opus Dei, 2003.

Tapia, Maria del Carmen. Beyond the Threshold: A Life in Opus Dei. New York: Continuum, 1997.

Thibodeaux, Mark E. Personal Interview. 7 Apr. 2006.

Tresniowski, Alex, et al. “The Real Opus Dei.” People 8 May 2006: 211-212.

Weigel, George. Witness to Hope. New York: Hyercollins, 2001. 449-450.

Woodward, Kenneth L. “A Coming Out Party in Rome: Opus Dei Prepares to Stand by its Man.” Newsweek 18 May 1992: 62. Opus Dei Awareness Network. <http://odan.org/woodward_newsweek_1992-05-18.pdf>.

Yepes, Pablo. E-mail Interview. 23 Mar. 2006.