

Scientology. To hear some folk tell it, Opus Dei (The Work of God) belongs to that company, except it is bigger and more dangerous. Opus Dei is, they say, a secretive, cult-like organization that is running a vast international conspiracy with unlimited funding and tentacles reaching into the most unlikely centers of power. In short, Opus Dei is "controversial."

So how does one go about making up his mind about a movement such as this? I have no connections with Opus Dei, but over the last ten years I have developed friendships with a number of people, priests and laity, who are involved in The Work. For example, Dr. Joaquin Navarro-Valls, the communications director for the Vatican. He is an extraordinarily personable gentleman, and we have had long conversations about, *inter alia*, the importance of Opus Dei in his life. He does not push the movement, but speaks in a matter-of-fact and utterly persuasive manner about how Opus Dei has helped him to understand and sustain his vocation as a Christian layman. And there are others in Opus Dei who speak in a similar vein. But in making up one's mind there is no denying that a privileged witness is Pope John Paul II. He has been publicly and consistently supportive of Opus Dei, granting it in 1982 the singular status of a "personal prelature," which means the jurisdiction of its bishop is not limited to a region but includes everyone in Opus Dei. In 1992 he beatified the founder of Opus Dei, Msgr. Josemaria Escriva, who died in 1975. The Pope has spoken of Opus Dei as an instrument of energetic orthodoxy that is a great gift for the renewal of the Church and its mission in the world. Of course that does not mean that Catholics must agree. Orthodox Catholics who otherwise have the greatest respect for the Pope have had bad experiences with Opus Dei and think that maybe he does not always know what the organization is actually doing. Be that as it may, in forming one's approach to Opus Dei, the strong and consistent affirmation of John Paul II cannot help but carry very considerable weight.

Since it was established in Spain in 1928, there have been a slew of books attacking Opus Dei, and we are told that more are in the works. For those of a leftist disposition, it is sufficient damnation that Opus Dei members were prominent in the government of General Franco. It is seldom mentioned that those same Opus Dei members were key players in Spain's successful transition to democracy. Today Opus Dei has about seventy-seven thousand members in eighty-three countries, including fifteen hundred priests and fifteen bishops.

One cannot emphasize too strongly that Opus Dei understands its mission to be the revival of the lay apostolate. While priests do the things that priests do in their capacity as spiritual directors, Opus Dei members frequently describe themselves as

THE WORK OF GOD

The Ku Klux Klan, the Michigan Militia, and

anticlerical. Not in the sense that they are opposed to clergy, but in that they oppose the old clericalist notion that lay people are second-class (at best) members of the Church. Opus Dei members sometimes suggest that the movement is responsible for Vatican II's lifting up of the dignity of the lay vocation, which is undoubtedly going one claim too far. But it is ironic that some of the harshest critics, who think of themselves as great champions of the laity, have not recognized the similar inspiration in Opus Dei.

The Work became active in North America about twenty years ago, and now has approximately three thousand members and runs sixty-four centers (often residences near major universities), five high schools, and several retreats. The Opus Dei presence has not always been welcomed by Catholic ministries on campuses, and this has occasioned some notable controversies. The cause, it seems, is sometimes personality conflict, sometimes a too aggressive approach by Opus Dei, and, in a number of cases, resentment by super-progressive priests of a movement that proposes a different, and deeply conservative, way of being Catholic. The charge heard again and again is that Opus Dei is secretive and cult-like in recruiting new members.

The Disillusioned

These and other charges were again aired in a major article this past year in *America*, the Jesuit magazine (February 25, 1995). The issue had a lurid red cover with nothing but the words "Opus Dei" in sharp relief, and I approached it with the expectation of reading another slash-and-burn attack on the movement. It turned out, however, to be a reasonably temperate and balanced treatment—in comparison, that is, with the usual stuff on Opus Dei. A great deal of attention was given to the testimony of people who had had unhappy experiences with Opus Dei, and to the views of Kenneth Woodward, religion reporter for *Newsweek*, often a fair-minded fellow, who has a long-standing hostility to Opus Dei.

Every movement has people who left for one reason or another, and, as is the case with jilted lovers, it is hard to know how to evaluate their testimony. They complain that they were recruited under the guise of friendship, that they were not told at first what they would be getting into, that women are separated from and subordinate to men, and so forth. What it apparently amounts to is that some people discovered that Opus Dei was not for them and were disappointed and embittered about that. Certainly Opus Dei is demanding. A full-fledged "numerary," for instance, makes a commitment to celibacy, lives in an Opus Dei center, and follows a rigorous daily schedule of prayer and spiritual discipline. Clearly, it is not for everyone. But the critics say it is more than that, that Opus Dei is a

cult. A few parents unhappy with their children's association with Opus Dei have even formed an Opus Dei Awareness Network, and make the usual claims about "brainwashing" and the like.

I know some of these parents and cannot help but feel considerable sympathy. One wonders, however, if in some cases they are not experiencing, in intensified form, the pain of recognizing that their children are growing up and therefore, in a certain necessary sense, away from them. The mother of a young man I will here call Billy relates in tears how he went away to university, came into contact with Opus Dei in his third year, and now has decided to commit himself as a numerary. "He's completely alienated from us." "His father and I had such plans for him." "He's not my Billy that I knew four years ago." Sympathy yes, but tempered sympathy. He strikes one as a sensible young man, mature for his years, and enormously grateful for the life he has found with Opus Dei. He insists he is not alienated from his parents, but every contact with them, especially with his mother, is an ongoing and ugly hassle over Opus Dei. "She can't accept that I must do with my life what I believe God wants me to do."

It is an intergenerational conflict that has been around from the beginning of time. Innumerable young people, including recognized saints, have caught a vision of radical discipleship and pursued a course vehemently opposed by parents and family. This should come as no surprise to people who follow the One who said, "He who loves father or mother more than me . . ." It is especially odd that this conflict should figure so large in a Jesuit magazine, for it is within living memory that a more demanding Society of Jesus was frequently accused of recruiting young men to a pattern of discipleship that pitted them against parents who had other plans for their children's lives.

The *America* article also highlights the fact that the formal "constitutions" of Opus Dei are available in Latin and Spanish but not in English. This is taken as evidence that the organization is concealing something from outsiders, and even from its own members. Opus Dei responds that the Holy See, for some unknown reason, does not want the constitutions translated into English, although some members have told me that they are being translated. They add that the constitutions are merely legal stipulations, and that they contain nothing that members and prospective members are not told. In any event, the constitutions are readily available in Latin, and we know that there are still Jesuits who can read Latin. If there is anything they find objectionable in the constitutions, the critics of Opus Dei have ample opportunities to publicize their objections.

So why the intense, sometimes venomous, attacks on Opus Dei? In my experience, the members of Opus Dei are not secretive, but they are sometimes

very defensive. That is perhaps understandable, given the nature and persistence of the attacks, but it is still a problem, and Opus Dei members with whom I have spoken generally recognize it as a problem. Then too, Opus Dei sometimes presents itself as the saving remnant of orthodoxy in a Church that is largely apostate. This is unattractive and, if not entirely untrue, greatly exaggerated. But such exaggeration is not surprising among people who feel that they are part of a rare, comprehensive, and commanding vision of what it means to serve Christ and his Church with the entirety of their being. Of course there is the danger of fanaticism, but it seems to me that Opus Dei is keenly aware of that, and its program of spiritual direction assiduously guards against it. People who think that the way to avoid fanaticism is never to surrender oneself to a commanding truth live desiccated lives and end up breeding their own, and usually less interesting, fanaticisms.

The opposition to Opus Dei cannot be explained without at least some reference to jealousy. Competition and jealousy among religious movements in the Catholic Church is nothing new, and some Opus Dei members are not hesitant to suggest that theirs is now the role in the Church once played by the Jesuits. The Jesuits, who were once viewed as the elite corps of the papacy, have in recent decades had a sharply attenuated relationship to the hierarchical leadership of the Church. The famous “fourth vow” of allegiance to the pope is now frequently understood by Jesuits as a vow to the papacy in general—meaning the papacy as they think it ought to be. (The articles on Jesuits and Jesuit spirituality in the new *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, edited by Richard McBrien, make no mention of obedience to the pope.)

It is not surprising that this pontificate has looked with particular favor on Opus Dei, Focolare, Legionaries of Christ, and similar movements that have sprung up to champion the magisterium’s understanding of the renewal called for by Vatican II. As for Opus Dei itself, it is, as the Catholic Church views things, still a very young movement, and in this country its work has hardly gotten underway. From the general media and from liberal Catholics, it is not going to get a fair shake for a very long time, if ever. Opus Dei has, as they say, a big image problem, and it will have to learn to live with that without being intimidated by it. Over time, as more people became acquainted with the people who are Opus Dei, and as Opus Dei members engage in works that are generally respected, the day may come when Opus Dei will no longer be routinely described as “controversial.” And maybe not. There are some things eminently worth being controversial for. Meanwhile, one cannot help but be impressed by the people who believe that they have found in Opus Dei a way to make an unqualified gift

of their lives to Christ and his Church.

FT