
THE MASS-MEDIA AND OPUS DEI

An interview with Cardinal J Hoeffner, Archbishop of Cologne

This interview was released by the German Catholic News Agency (KNA) and published in the Deutsche Tagespost on 29 August 1984. The background to it was the publication of erroneous information (disinformation, one might say) in the German media regarding the nature and aims of the Church's first personal Prelature.

Given the interest shown by Irish radio, TV and newspapers in Opus Dei in recent months and years it is surprising and somewhat strange that no mention of this interview has been made to date in Ireland. For that reason we offer it to our readers.

KNA: *Your Eminence, for some time now Opus Dei has been the subject of a series of attacks in Germany, including Cologne. What is your opinion about Opus Dei?*

Cardinal Hoeffner: Opus Dei is a personal Prelature erected by the Pope. It has spread throughout the world and has over 70,000 members of whom approximately 1,200 are priests. The number of ordinations to the priesthood each year is truly amazing. Last year 69 members were ordained and at present there are 394 members preparing for ordination. All these priests have previously worked in civil society: as doctors, engineers, teachers and so on.

When visiting other countries, I have asked local bishops about the apostolic work of Opus Dei and they have voiced their appreciation. I myself have visited numerous Opus Dei apostolates such as industrial training schools, agricultural colleges, and adult education institutions. I have been most impressed by them.

I knew the Founder of Opus Dei, Monsignor Escrivá, personally and had long conversations with him. I came to esteem him as a priest who was filled with apostolic zeal. The goal he set the Work impressed me particularly: that each Christian should show his faith in everyday life: in marriage, at work, at home and in social life. In this way he or she brings Christ's message to the centre of civil society. It doesn't surprise me to find that following Christ, which is always a radical path, is not applauded by the 'world'.

Q. *Opus Dei is often accused of submitting children and teenagers to psychic pressure and of separating them from their parents?*

A. In earlier centuries the Jesuits were bitterly attacked with the same accusations, almost word for word, as those levelled today against Opus Dei. Let me give you a few examples. In 1881, H. Meurer lists the following charges: 'children and youths are being "broken-in" in the educational institutions run by Jesuits', that in the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus, 'kept secret initially', 'a blind obedience' is demanded of Jesuits; 'how is it possible that the Jesuit Order obtains enough novices, who submit themselves to such disgraceful procedures' (1). In 1895 Eberhard Gothein wrote that the Founder of the Jesuits, Ignatius of Loyola maintained that young people should be trained to 'go to Confession frequently and attend Mass daily'; parents can be won over 'through their sons' (2).

In 1906 Franz Heiner felt that dislike of the Jesuits was 'intense'; that 'not even Catholic circles are free from this feeling'; and 'supposed or real mistakes of individual members are blamed on the Society of Jesus itself' (3).

Q. *But it's parents themselves who bear witness against Opus Dei.*

A. One should not say *parents*, but rather *a few parents*. Many parents whose sons or daughters are connected with Opus Dei have written to me in an entirely different vein. Since these have been given very little publicity to date, I will read you a few extracts from the large selection of letters I have in front of me.

One couple writes: 'as parents of three children, of whom two are members of Opus Dei, we wish to acknowledge our gratitude for the spiritual assistance they have received from Opus Dei. They did not receive help of that kind either at school or from the parish. Our children are content and happy in Opus Dei'. Another father tells me: 'From my own experience I can say that the members of the Work grow in their love for their own family, and at the same time they

follow a vocation which has its own consequences; just like someone who gets married and leaves his parents' home to set up his own family. In this case also we parents have to do without the physical presence of our children. This is the law of life; we don't rear children for ourselves but rather to ensure that they become responsible members of the Church and of the State. Finally, as parents, we should be grateful for the vocation of our children, because they give us no cause for concern, they are happy, have a good family life, and, partly thanks to the positive influence of Opus Dei, they are successful in their career. I write not as a member, but rather as the father of two children who have been in Opus Dei for many years'. In another letter I am told: 'My son has been a member of Opus Dei for a number of years. I get on very well with him and I'm happy that he is in the Work because I know that he is being helped to live as a Christian'. A mother writes: 'My son is in Opus Dei for a number of years. He hasn't drifted away from us. . . He is a happy person with deep spiritual convictions. My husband and I respect his decision and we are happy about his way of life'.

In another letter: 'I have four children who for many years have taken part in the youth-club activities of Opus Dei. Two of them have now joined the Work. I respect their decision. Don't 18 year-olds also join religious orders?'. Another mother writes: 'As the mother of a member of Opus Dei, I should like to let you know that I am very happy about his vocation. The deep piety of my son, who is at present doing his military service, helps all of us face up to and bear better the difficulties of each day'. Yet another mother writes: 'Our eldest son has been a member of Opus Dei for years. He is — and I say this not as a mother who loves her son — an intelligent person and of exemplary character. After thinking about it up for a number of years, he found in Opus Dei his life's work'. In yet another letter: 'As parents we are grateful indeed for the good influence which Opus Dei has had and continues to have on our children'. I could go on and on with many letters. I will finish with this quotation: 'Our son, who is a member of Opus Dei, has not distanced himself from us; in no way has he changed psychically, and certainly he is not a fanatic'.

Q. *Opus Dei is accused of overstressing the obligatory nature of God's will; this isn't in agreement with the liberating attitudes of today's society.*

A. If we were to separate the serious nature of God's holy will from our preception of God as Father, we would have falsely understood God's merciful love. The message Jesus brought about God the Father is not sentimental or soft. Jesus exorts us to fear him who has power to bury our body and soul in hell (*Mt* 10:28). Forgiveness of sins demands that we change our ways and begin a new life. 'See, you are well! Sin no more, that nothing worse befall you', Jesus said to the man he cured at the pool of Bethesda (*Jn* 5:14). 'He who does not believe is condemned already' (*Jn* 3:18). Today there are truths of faith and commandments of God which have been forgotten by many. Opus Dei acts in keeping with the Church when it preaches these truths of faith and those commandments of God, even if this gives rise to criticism and opposition. Jesus Christ said 'for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law' (*Lk* 12:52-53).

Recently in Rome, I asked a Cardinal who had the task of studying Opus Dei for a number of years, why Opus Dei comes in for so much criticism. The Cardinal answered: 'it is because of the remorse of conscience of those who criticise it'.

A campaign has been waged in the city of Cologne and in the Ministry for Labour, Health and Social Affairs of North-Rhineland- Westphalia with a view to preventing the work with youth which is carried out by Opus Dei. At the same time a document entitled 'Information on venereal diseases' is published by the same ministry in which it is said that the best way of avoiding the disease is through fidelity to one's partner. But, the report goes on to say, that 'nowadays not everyone feels like being always faithful to only one person . . .so, those who change partner frequently should remember that. . .'. If priests of Opus Dei were to defend such permissive views, public opinion would sing their praises.

Q. *Hasn't Opus Dei also made mistakes?*

A. Nobody denies that. The Church is a Church of sinners. The members of Opus Dei are also sinners. Nor would I deny that cases of excessive zeal or imprudence can occur, and have in fact occurred in a young movement.

Q. *Referring to certain penitential practices which are customary among its members, Opus Dei is accused of being hostile to the human body.*

A. As regards ascetical practice, Opus Dei follows the age-old tradition of our Church. The penitential practices you refer to are mentioned in the rule of St Benedict, the patron saint of Europe. They can only be understood in the context of faith; their use presupposes maturity and a deep spiritual life, and has nothing to do with masochism. The basic point at issue is the relationship between man and his body. God created us with a body. That body is neither a prison, nor a grave, nor a mere tool of the soul, but a living tabernacle, a living wrapping, an intimate companion of the soul. The body is the form of man, which the spirit shapes; it is the form in which we exist in this world. Really, to be precise, we don't *possess* a body in the way someone possesses something which is not himself; rather we *are* corporeal. The body has an integrally human character.

We Christians are aware of an even deeper mystery about the body. Through the Incarnation of God the Son, our body has been sanctified. 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? So glorify God in your body' (1 Cor 6:19-20).

But the Christian understanding of the human body is not limited only to a young, beautiful and healthy body; it also includes that body disfigured by vice and sin, worn-out, on the way to death and to the corruption of the grave. The Second Vatican Council says that 'man has been wounded by sin' and that we find by experience that our 'body is in revolt' (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 14). For some people the body is not a living temple for the soul, but an idol. That does not lead to liberation, but rather to the debasement of man and to the loss of human dignity.

Nowadays vast numbers of people debase and ruin their bodies with alcohol abuse and drug addiction. Is it, then, so difficult, to understand that there are some Christians who want to remind themselves of the dual meaning of the human body, by means of corporal penances? Asceticism, according to the Statutes of Opus Dei, is to be sought in humility, in serene cheerfulness, in work, in overcoming oneself, in temperance and moderation, and also in acts of penance. These penitential exercises, which were in common use in monasteries up to our own times, belonged to the intimacy of the sacrament of Penance, so that even the superior didn't know about them.

Q. *It is alleged that Opus Dei endeavours to recruit children and youths who are too young.*

A. It is laid down in the Statutes of Opus Dei that a young person can only be incorporated at the age of 18 and then only for a year at a time. Definitive membership is only possible at the age of 23. We should bear in mind that present legislation in the Federal Republic of Germany permits a 16-year old girl to marry and 14-year-old children to opt out of religion classes at school without their parents' consent.

Q. *What is your Eminence's opinion of the allegation that blind obedience is demanded of the members of Opus Dei.*

A. It is slanderous to say that Opus Dei demands a blind obedience. The members of Opus Dei know and observe the obedience of the Gospel. They wish to express their total dedication to our Lord through obedience, and so become like him who 'humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (*Phil 2:8*). Such obedience does not demand demeaning gestures, but rather that pure spiritual disposition which we call humility.

Besides, the expression 'corpse-like obedience', which is sometimes referred to, is not to be found in Opus Dei but in the Constitutions of St Ignatius (4). It means the willingness of a religious to obey something, within the sphere of moral good and the rule of the order, that is commanded by his

superior. The comparison with a 'dead body' is age-old in Christian asceticism.

The Statutes of Opus Dei expressly state that in social and political matters the members 'are entirely free, just like any other Catholic citizen', and this naturally, 'within the guidelines of Catholic faith and morals' (5).

Q. *How do you explain, then, your Eminence, why public opinion has turned against Opus Dei with such severity?*

A. I am appalled by what certain sections of the mass-media have done in recent months. Are they trying to create an 'enemy effigy', the 'Opus Dei enemy effigy' and so poison people's hearts? Numerous people have expressed their indignation to me at the biased reporting on Opus Dei from the 'Westdeutscher' radio station. They sent me copies of their letters, in which they criticise the tendentious programmes on the 'Westdeutscher' radio, as being 'unbalanced, prejudiced, tendentious, one-sided', and for having set 'mob psychology mechanisms' in motion, just as the 'sensationalist press' does. They reproach the 'unfair and narrow presentation' full of 'negative one-sidedness', 'defamatory reporting', 'doing everything possible to vilify'. I don't know how the 'Westdeutscher' radio has replied to the letter-writers. It would certainly be worthwhile for a university institute specialising in studies on public opinion to access the objectivity of those programmes which have been directed against Opus Dei.

Q. *Things have stirred up again since your Eminence offered a parish in the Cologne archdiocese to Opus Dei.*

A. Pope John Paul II has entrusted a parish of his episcopal See of Rome to Opus Dei. Cardinal Koenig of Vienna has also handed over the pastoral care of a Viennese parish to priests of Opus Dei. As recently as 21 August 1984, the Cardinal was telling me how well the Opus Dei priests carry out their pastoral work in that parish in Vienna. Two young priests (one of whom was ordained after he had qualified as a lawyer, and the other, a teacher, has a doctorate in canon law) are willing to take charge of a parish in Cologne. In

making my decision, should I conform to the wishes of the mass-media agitators, or rather to the example set by the Holy Father and by the Cardinal of Vienna? Would it be justifiable to place, as it were, a ban on the priests of Opus Dei, who are in communion with the Holy Father, and prevent them from working professionally for the Cologne archdiocese? Certain elements of the media are very sensitive and quick to react to anything that smacks of an incident of 'professional blacking' for political reasons. Yet, they rejoice at the idea of Opus Dei priests being 'professionally blacked', just as they rejoice at the removal of immunity when it refers to the sphere of privacy of Opus Dei members.

Q. *Another Cardinal, the Archbishop of Westminster, G Basil Hume, has spoken critically about Opus Dei.*

A. Cardinal Hume expressed some recommendations which are fulfilled in the Statutes of Opus Dei and in the new Code of Canon Law: one can only become a member of Opus Dei when one comes of age. Each member has the right to go to Confession to the priest of his choice, whether he be a priest of Opus Dei or not. The Centres of Opus Dei are known, as are the people who run them. Besides, Cardinal Hume made the point that 'these recommendations must not be seen as a criticism of the integrity of the members of Opus Dei or of their zeal in promoting apostolate'.

Cologne, 23 August 1984.

References

- (1) H. Meurer, 'Jesuiten und Jesuitismus', Muenster 1881, pp. 177-178; (2) Eberhard Gothein, 'Ignatius von Loyola und die Gegenreformation', Halle 1895, p. 355; (3) Franz Heiner, 'Die Jesuiten und ihre Gegner', Munich 1906, p. 92; (4) Const. Soc. Jesu, VI, 1,1; (5) Statuta, no. 88, 3.