

The Secrets of Opus Dei: The conspiracy that never was

By Leon J. Podles

March 1995 | Crisis

In Spain Opus Dei was once taken to court by its detractors, who accused it of being a Freemasonic conspiracy. The judge asked if its members were chaste. The accusers admitted that they were. The judge dismissed the suit, saying that he had never met a chaste Freemason. However, Opus Dei plays the role in the liberal demonology that Freemasonry plays in the European conservative demonology. It is a vast, secret organization, seeking world domination.

It extends tentacles of power everywhere, and has sinister designs on the church and secular governments. It is said to worship the hat of its founder (or is that what Tradition, Family, and Property does? It's hard to keep these things straight). What is it in Opus Dei that provokes semi-rational liberals to frothing rage?

Opus Dei was started in Spain by Msgr. Jose-maria Escrivá de Balaguer y Albas in the 1920s. Msgr. Escrivá was given the insight that it was not necessary to leave ordinary life and become a priest or religious to seek sanctity. People living and working in the world could live a life of holiness, including the full practice of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Opus Dei (or the Work, as it is sometimes called in English) took root in Spain initially and later spread throughout the world. Today it has about 70,000 members. Msgr. Escrivá died in 1975, was declared venerable in 1991, and was beatified in 1992.

Opus Dei is both innovative and conservative. It encourages the traditional Catholic practices of Counter-Reformation piety: daily Mass, the Rosary, novenas, mental prayer, and spiritual direction. It appeals to all classes of society. Unlike most religious orders, it does not concentrate on institutions. It runs the University of Navarre in Spain, and a few schools and centers throughout the world. The innovation is that it seeks to counteract the feeling among Catholics that it is necessary to become a priest or religious in order to pursue holiness. This is a novelty in the Counter-Reformation Church which, in reaction to Protestantism, had stressed the importance of the priestly and religious vocations. However, it is not totally new in the context of Christian history. St. Paul stresses the importance of fulfilling their daily duties in marriage and work to the Christians of the new churches, who were tempted to neglect such duties in their enthusiasm for the charisms and their eager anticipation of the imminent end of the world. Later, when the ascetic movement, the forerunner of monastic and religious life, entered the Church, work was also sometimes neglected. Asceticism is not a Christian phenomenon, but a part of every religion. The desert fathers stressed that self-denial, such as fasting, should not interfere with the daily work of the monk. Benedictine monasticism tried to balance both demands of religious life in its motto *ora et labora* (prayer and work).

However, by the late medieval ages Catholics had it firmly in their minds that a serious Christian should become a priest or religious. The Reformation reacted to this, and stressed the importance of family life and the fulfillment of one's duties as a way to please God. One of the Reformation's best contributions to lay life was the Anglican William Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life* (1728). Law said "all parts of our life are to be made holy and acceptable to God," and "this holiness of common life, this religious use of everything that we have, is a devotion that is the duty of all orders of Christian people." In the Catholic Church St. Francis de Sales' advice to the laity in *The Introduction to the Devout Life* took a similar line. In the 19th century Thérèse of Lisieux was given the Little Way, in which the

performance of unspectacular duties and the acceptance of small mortifications was seen as a better way to please God than spectacular self-denial which contains dangers of self-dramatization and spiritual pride.

Msgr. Escrivá is in this school of spirituality. Opus Dei operates as a network of spiritual direction which tries to help lay people living in families and working in secular occupations pursue sanctity. Fidelity to daily prayer is stressed. Monthly meetings and annual workshops provide instruction in doctrine and advice on leading Christian lives. Self-denial and mortification are seen as most effective when they are done in the context of daily life: washing the dishes instead of leaving them in the sink overnight, keeping your desk clean, doing your work today instead of postponing it until tomorrow (a radical innovation in Hispanic cultures where *man ana* is the answer to most requests for action). In addition to advocating this unexceptionable way of life, Opus Dei is doctrinally conservative and stresses loyalty to the Pope.

But these customs do not totally explain the attractiveness of Opus Dei. It would take a saint or at least an historian of spirituality to do justice to the place of Opus Dei in the Church. Since none have yet done so I offer a few precarious and tentative observations.

Opus Dei seems to me to be a revival, a continuation, or perhaps a modernization of the great Catholic spirituality of the Baroque. The Baroque emphasized the goodness of creation and of creativity, and led to a magnificent efflorescence of Catholic culture and art. Similarly Opus Dei emphasizes the goodness of creation, of creative work, and of procreation. During a retreat an Opus Dei priest asked what would Jesus's reaction be to the achievements of the modern world. The priest thought that Jesus would say they were basically very good, that there were problems that needed correction, but that man's creativity had accomplished something good. Christians should not withdraw from this world, the priest continued, invoking a familiar theme of Msgr. Escrivá, but use their work to sanctify the world. The Pope, who is obviously sympathetic to Opus Dei, also emphasizes the goodness of creation and human work as sharing in God's creativity. Msgr. Escrivá's first aphorism is: "Don't let your life be sterile." The only time I have ever heard (as opposed to having read) that contraception is sinful, and demands repentance, was in an Opus Dei talk. The Baroque, in stressing the goodness of creation, thereby tapped the erotic energy of the human personality in the service of Christianity. Bernini's *St. Theresa in Ecstasy* is the best known product of this milieu; but the Baroque and Rococo churches of Germany are filled with cupids darting arrows of love at the hearts of man and God. I detect a similar note in the spirituality of Opus Dei.

Msgr. Escrivá, as the many videos of him show, was an extremely warm and outgoing person, even for a Spaniard. He gave the *embraza* (the ceremonial hug and kisses on both cheeks) to all the men he met. But even when he was in his seventies, he explained that he did not give it to women. At most he would kiss the hand of an elderly woman to honor her motherhood. Nor was this play acting. When he was being hunted in Madrid during the Civil War, he was offered refuge in an apartment for a few weeks, a refuge that might have been necessary to save his life. When he asked who else would be there, and was informed only a housekeeper in her early twenties, he took the key and threw it down the sewer, saying never would he take the chance that he might compromise his priestly celibacy. He obviously knew temptation and the special urgency that passion seems to take under conditions of war and imminent death. In his aphorisms, there are remarks that may sound a little trite until they are placed in the proper context of eros in the service of God. He says that once someone

asked him if he were in love, because there was a special sparkle in his eye. The Monsignor said that he was, but not in the way the person thought.

In his public meetings, many of the questions from the floor dealt with affairs of the heart. He showed sympathy and delicacy in answering them, but could also be blunt. He knew from hearing confessions of the frequent adulteries that poison marriages, but he pointed out that women must share the blame. He told women that they succumbed to frumpiness, and ceased trying to be attractive to their husbands, whose eyes wandered elsewhere.

Remarks like this breathe the wholesome, sweet eroticism of the *Song of Songs*. Msgr. Escrivá realized that human attractiveness is important to spreading Christianity. "Long faces, coarse manners, a ridiculous appearance, a repelling air. Is that how you incite others to follow Christ?" This is his version of the observation attributed to various saints of the Baroque: "You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar."

All this placed within the tradition of asceticism and a realism about fallen nature. Opus Dei has always emphasized frequent confession and the ordinary means of penance. But the focus remains on the goodness of creation and ordinary life, not upon the heart-rending spectacle of human depravity, as it is in Lutheran and Calvinist traditions. Nor was there a cheap optimism on Msgr. Escrivá's part. He lived through the Spanish Civil War, in which death by firing squad was one of the more merciful fates that priests suffered.

All this is innocuous or even charming, but Msgr. Escrivá faced opposition from the start. What did Catholics find objectionable in his approach?

While I was a student at Providence College, I received an unbiased view of the controversies of the Jesuits and Dominicans. *De Auxiliis* (the controversy on grace) was of course the high spot, but another area in which the two orders enjoyed a good fight was spirituality. The Jesuits opined that the laity were bound by the Ten Commandments, but not by the counsels, which were reserved for those in religion. The Dominicans argued that the call to evangelical perfection was addressed to all Christians, not just the religious. The Second Vatican Council settled the matter in favor of the Dominicans: all are called to holiness. But that was not the opinion in Spain in the 1920s. A priest who was trying to help laymen to live a life of holiness was seen as somehow subversive (probably a Freemason, the suspicious opponents snorted into their sherry), and provoked opposition.

Originally Opus Dei was confined only to men. In all of Western Christianity religion is a feminine affair, and women are more active in church life than men. Msgr. Escrivá, however, realized that appealing to men through their work was a possible way of reaching them. That is, he could show them that their worldly work could be a way of pleasing God, and that piety would not convert them into sacristy hangers-on or sanctuary drones, but would help them to be responsible in their work. He stressed the divine filiation, the fact that grace truly converts us into sons of God.

Nowadays, however, it is not reactionary prelates in Spain who dislike Opus Dei, but the trendy set. Something in Opus Dei provokes bitter hatred and wild accusations among liberals who ignore such truly right-wing movements as the Lefebvrites. Why does Opus Dei provoke them?

Before the May 1992 beatification of Msgr. Escrivá, liberals in the Church had what in popular terminology is called a connoption. Michael Walsh, ex-Jesuit, had been preparing his blast against Opus Dei for several years, and published in England *The Secret World of Opus Dei, An Investigation into the Controversial Sect at the Heart of the Roman Catholic Church*, which proved so libelous that it could not be published in the United States until a few of the more outrageous lies had been removed. It has been reincarnated as *Opus Dei: An Investigation into the Secret Society Struggling for Power within the Roman Catholic Church*, which unfortunately is the only generally-available book in English on Opus Dei. Walsh seems to have modeled his portrait of Opus Dei on the ecclesiology of *Maria Monk*, and to have formed his controversial style by studying *St. Fidgeta and Other Parodies*.

The book is a compendium of all possible (and some impossible) accusations against Opus Dei. Walsh's book could serve as a textbook on the art of the slur, or, as the English reviewer in *The Spectator* called it, poisoning the wells. My favorite accusation: students' meetings with Opus Dei priests for spiritual direction are called "unauthorized assignations ["meetings" in the American version] the Tridentine form of the Mass, as did the entire Church at one time. Opus Dei encourages the Rosary, novenas, and benediction—practices which were universal only a generation ago. If there is a lesson to be learned from Church history, it is perhaps that the traditional forms of religious life—the Jesuits, the Xaverians, the various foundations of sisters—are not adequate to deal with problems of the modern Church, and that some new form of life, perhaps Opus Dei, perhaps something else, is necessary to preserve the essence of Catholic life in a new organizational form.

Walsh is correct in seeing that Opus Dei is trying to maintain some Christian customs that are being given up elsewhere in the Church. Opus Dei is trying to help its members lead a life of pre-Enlightenment, pre-Modernist spirituality while working in the world. This is very difficult. Not only are there the ordinary temptations of life, there is a constant danger of compartmentalizing life so that religion and ordinary life co-exist but do not mingle. Msgr. Escrivá was well aware of the dangers, and addressed them in his book of aphorisms, *The Way*.

As a criticism of Opus Dei, Walsh's book cannot lay claim to an ounce of intellectual seriousness. He accuses Opus Dei of legalism, and then devotes over half the book to canon law minutiae that he admits even the Vatican rarely takes seriously. He repeats every rumor and whisper, and asserts the resulting farrago of misrepresentations and lies has historical value. Opus Dei grants vast freedom to its members, which causes it to attract eccentrics who sometimes go off the deep end and must be asked to leave. Walsh has sought out unstable ex-members who could list the strengths and weaknesses of Opus Dei. Even Walsh calls one of them "paranoid"; and when even they don't agree with his elaborate conspiracy theories, he dismisses them as naïve.

Most troubling about Walsh's criticisms is what they reveal about that part of the Church that identifies itself with liberation theology, creation theology, and the like. When one does something fairly innocuous that arouses a violent reaction from those who disagree with him, it is usually a sign of bad conscience on the part of the objectors. One reason for the criticism is that liberals see Opus Dei as a sign that *they* have chosen the wrong path, that the way of true renewal lies in fidelity to prayer and to the Church, not in the pursuit of theological fads and leftist fantasies. Still, that hardly seems sufficient cause for hysteria. If Opus Dei is anachronistic, it will wither away. If it is but an eddy on the river of progress, it will disappear. Liberals could take the attitude of Gamaliel and say that if it is of God, it will

flourish; if it is not, it will die out. There seems to be a tender spot on the liberal soul that the mere existence of Opus Dei has touched and galled. My wife suspects it is simply the emphasis on frequent confession—we sinners hate being reminded that we are sinners, even in a mild and gentle way. I think that is part of the reason for the dislike of Opus Dei, but I suspect the root reason for the animosity has a specific historical cause.

More than anything else Opus Dei is a challenge to clericalism—the tendency to identify priests and religious with the church. Msgr. Escrivá had some harsh things to say about the "professional Catholics" of Franco's Spain, who found worldly advantage in the Catholic faith. But clericalism is endemic among those who regard themselves as progressives or liberals. A clericalist sees the life of the Church as centered on the sacristy and the chancery. The clerical life is one of exercising power over the benighted. The vocation of the post-Vatican II laity, in the updated clericalist mindset, is to participate in this way of life. Therefore a Catholic is most a Christian when he is engaged in a clerical or quasi-clerical activity. This is the point of conflict. Where a clericalist progressive wants the laity to participate as much as possible in clerical activities, and therefore wants the laity to take over the functions of the priest, Opus Dei sees the vocation of the lay Christian as primarily in the world. It appeals not only to domestics and farmers, but also to professional people, who have a sense that their secular work is important and want to make it pleasing to God. That is why Opus Dei has had surprising success among university types, such as Harvard medical and law graduates, and Berkeley and Wellesley graduates; and why it provokes the envious attacks of the clericalists, who are disappointed that the professional women that Opus Dei attracts—doctors and physicists—are not clamoring to be ordained priests and share in the exalted life of the clergy.

Clericalism is a very serious deformation of Christianity. The person afflicted by it sees the clerical vocation not as one of service and sacrifice, but of power. I fear the problem is that clericalist liberals are scarcely Christian at all. Walsh finds it deeply shocking that Msgr. Escrivá wrote: "Wherever you see a poor, wooden Cross, alone, uncared-for, worthless... and without a Corpus, don't forget that that Cross is your Cross—the everyday hidden Cross, unattractive and unconsoling—the Cross that is waiting for the Corpus it lacks: and that Corpus must be you." Msgr. Escrivá is simply telling us to follow the call of Jesus: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." Walsh thinks that there can be a Christianity without the cross. What Walsh inadvertently reveals is that what is troubling the Church is not dissent or even heresy, but nihilism. This is harsh, but liberals, having succumbed to various forms of soft nihilism, see the key to life as seizing and exercising power. Feminist theology is endlessly preoccupied with power. Walsh, a librarian, looks through a keyhole into the Church and thinks he sees an orgy of power politics from which he is excluded. He can't imagine that Christians, even those who occupy positions of authority, do not lust after power, but seek only to obey God. The kenosis, the self-emptying of God in the Incarnation and Passion is incomprehensible to them. Therefore, any movement that stresses mortification and self-abnegation, showing that it is not confined to a few ascetics but should characterize every Christian's life, is a rebuke to the most critical decision that liberals have made: that is, to fill the void their infidelity has created by seeking and worshipping power.

<http://www.podles.org/Opus-Dei.htm> [Última consulta 25.X.2012]