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Sunday, Apr. 16, 2006

The Ways of Opus Dei

By Jordan Bonfante

In early March, Elizabeth Heil, an arts-administration graduate student at Columbia University, was watching previews in a movie theater on Manhattan's Upper West Side when she cracked up inappropriately. The trailer was for the movie *The Da Vinci Code*, directed by Ron Howard and scheduled to open May 19, and it featured a grim-faced fellow uttering Christ's name repeatedly and then--wham!--whaling away at his already bloodied back with an Inquisition-issue cat-o'-nine-tails. It was not an intentionally funny scene. But Heil, who was familiar with the book on which the movie is based, recognized the figure onscreen as the albino assassin Silas, a fanatical, murderous member of a bizarre Catholic group called Opus Dei, and couldn't suppress a giggle. She is a member of the actual Opus Dei. "This is so outlandish," she recalls thinking. "I wish we were that interesting."

The *Da Vinci Code*'s Opus Dei--a powerful, ultraconservative Roman Catholic faction riddled with sadomasochistic ritual, one of whose members commits serial murder in pursuit of a church-threatening secret--is obviously not reflective of the real-life organization (although author Dan Brown's website states the portrayal was "based on numerous books written about Opus Dei as well as on my own personal interviews"). Yet in casting the group as his heavy, Brown was as shrewd as someone setting up an innocent man for a crime. You don't choose the head of the Rotary. You single out the secretive guy at the end of the block with the off-putting tics, who perhaps has a couple of incidents in his past that will hinder an effective defense. That's not Heil, but it's not a bad sketch of the organization to which she belongs.

In its 78 years, Opus Dei has been a rumor magnet. Successful and secretive, it has been accused of using lavish riches and carefully cultivated clout to do everything from propping up Francisco Franco's Spanish dictatorship to pushing through its founder's premature sainthood to planting conservative minions in governments from Warsaw to Washington. Brown's treatment of the group had seemed to represent an untoppable high-sewage mark--that is, until the movie trailer appeared. Says Juan Manuel Mora, director of Opus Dei's communications department in Rome: "Reading a print version is one thing. Seeing the color images is another."

Yet Mora and his colleagues have inaugurated a countertrend, in part by breaking their organization's historical silence. They spoke at length on record to John Allen, a respected print and television Vatican commentator, and offered him unprecedented access to Opus Dei records and personnel. In November he responded with *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church* (Doubleday), probably the most informed and sympathetic treatment of the group ever penned by an outsider. Opus has since talked freely to other journalists, including TIME's.

But Opus' public relations offensive hasn't quite managed to close the gap between what critics say it is about and its own version of the story. On one side there is "Octopus Dei," or, as the current issue of Harper's magazine puts it, "to a great extent ... an authoritarian and semi-clandestine enterprise that manages to infiltrate its indoctrinated technocrats, politicians and administrators into the highest levels of the state." On the other is the portrait painted by Opus' U.S. vicar Thomas Bohlin, who sat for several hours with TIME at his group's Manhattan headquarters. Opus, he explained, is just a teaching entity, a kind of advanced school for Catholic spiritual formation with minimal global coordination or input as to how members and sympathizers apply what they learn. "You know Dale Carnegie courses?" he asked. "Businesses send their people there to learn to speak better, to organize--they teach all these kinds of things. People go there because they get something out of it, and then when they graduate, they don't represent Dale Carnegie."

James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit publication *America* who has written critically about Opus, offers a middle ground between Dale Carnegie and the octopus: "Opus Dei provides members with an overarching spirituality for their life," he suggests. "It's an ongoing relationship that helps buttress and further shape the thought of people who are already conservative Catholics. That's a powerful symbiosis, and there's a personal connection between members, whether they're housewives or politicians. It's not an evil empire, but that doesn't mean there aren't serious issues that need to be addressed."

A first journalistic pass, by Allen or TIME, cannot fully resolve all those issues. But it can answer some of the questions that have long dogged the organization, and it may also show how *The Da Vinci Code* could end up helping Opus Dei.

HOW DID IT START?

On Oct. 2, 1928, a 26-year-old Spanish priest named Josemaría Escrivá was visited by a new vision of Catholic spirituality: a movement of pious laypeople who would, by prayerful contemplation and the dedication of their labor to Christ, extend the holiness of church on Sunday into their everyday work life. Escrivá's title for the movement was a literal description--Opus Dei means "the work of God"--and his ambition was correspondingly large. He saw Opus eventually acting as "an intravenous injection [of holiness] in the bloodstream of society."

It was controversial almost from birth. Opus threatened the era's Catholic clericalism, which privileged

priests, monks and nuns over the laity, and Escrivá was called a heretic. In the 1950s, several prominent Opus Dei members joined Franco's dictatorial but church-supportive regime in Spain, inaugurating speculation about the group's political leanings. The church's Second Vatican Council (1962-65) seemed to catch up with Escrivá's idea of lay activism--but his rigid adherence to Catholic teaching put his system at odds with liberals who accorded the laity a wide freedom of conscience. He himself was a polarizing figure, humble and grandiose, avuncular and ferocious. Opus grew slowly but steadily, remaining below the radar of most Catholics.

That all changed in 1982. Pope John Paul II, also a creative traditionalist interested in labor and faith, granted Escrivá's wish that Opus be a "personal prelature," a global quasi-diocese, able in some cases to leapfrog local archbishops and deal directly with Rome. Almost simultaneously the Pope publicly constricted the competing, more liberal Jesuit order. A perception that Opus' ecclesiastical power knew no limits peaked with Escrivá's 1992 beatification, a brief (for those days) 17 years after his death. Faultfinders, notes Allen, claimed that the judging panel had been packed and Escrivá's critics blackballed; they viewed his fast move toward sainthood as the muscle-flexing "ecclesiastical equivalent of [the Roman emperor] Caligula making his horse a senator." Allen sees the beatification as legitimate, as did 300,000 people who thronged Rome for Escrivá's 2002 canonization.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

Opus Dei is not a kind of spiritual pick-me-up for casual Catholics. It features a small, committed membership (85,500 worldwide and a mere 3,000 in the U.S.), many of whom come from pious families and are prepared to embrace unpopular church teachings such as its birth-control ban. Members take part in a rigorous course of spiritual "formation" stressing church doctrine and contemplation plus Escrivá's philosophy of work and personal holiness. Opus' core is its "numeraries," the 20% who, despite remaining lay, pledge celibacy, live together in one of about 1,700 sex-segregated "centers" and extend their training to a degree rivaling a priest's--all while holding day jobs, with most of their pay devolving to the group. That near cloistered life produces the group's most avid, satisfied members and its bitterest dropouts. Opus steers a small number of members toward the priesthood, and they exert considerable influence on the lay majority.

Some 70% of the membership, called supernumeraries, are much more of this world. They bend Opus' daily two hours of religious observance around a more typical--or perhaps retro, given the large size of many of their families--existence. Opus' sureties provide a spiritual grounding to life's everyday chaos and ambiguities. While she was raising seven children in the anything-goes 1970s, says Cathy Hickey of Larchmont, N.Y., Opus gave her "an underlying stream of peace and joy." Members bring a pious concentration to jobs that might otherwise be done less ethically or carefully. Heil, the Columbia student, says Opus "helps your whole life melt into this 24/7 conversation with God."

HOW SECRETIVE IS OPUS?

For all its uniqueness in mission and structure, Opus Dei is best known for being secretive. It has a special set of greetings: "Pax" and "In aeternum" ("Peace" and "In eternity"). Its 1950 constitution barred members from revealing their membership without permission from the director of their center. In 1982 a new document repudiated "secrecy or clandestine activity," and Bohlin, the U.S. vicar, claims that the continuing impression is a misunderstanding based again on decentralization. "People [get Opus training] and go back to where they were," he says. "So we never march in a parade as a group because we don't form a group. And when people don't see us marching, they say, 'They must be secret.'"

Yet Opus will still not identify its members, and many prefer not to identify themselves. In England, in late 2004, the Labour government's Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, went months before confirming she had received "spiritual support" from Opus. (Her exact status remains unclear.) Nor, as Allen shows in his book, will Opus formally own up to many of its institutions. Its U.S. schools tend to go by bland names like the Heights or Northridge Prep. For years, he reports, the 17-story U.S. headquarters in New York, finished in 2001, lacked an identifying street-level sign. Allen counts 15 universities, seven hospitals, 11 business schools and 36 primary and secondary schools around the world as what Opus calls "corporate works," as opposed to personal deeds. It is justly proud of 97 vocational-technical schools worldwide, which deflate the myth that Opus serves only the rich. But very few of the schools and hospitals are legally owned by Opus, which admits only to providing "doctrinal and spiritual formation." It is a tribute to the persistence of Allen and his financial expert, Joseph Harris, that they determined that at least in the U.S., Opus proper enjoys a minimum of "dual control" over them by placing members on their boards.

HOW RICH IS IT?

The normal assumption about such indirectness would be that the group is hiding something, and filthy lucre is a staple of the Opus myth. Two rumors about its popularity with John Paul were that it funded the Solidarity trade union and helped bail out the Vatican bank after its 1982 scandal. Poverty is demonstrably not one of Opus' vows. It has a reputation for cultivating the rich or those soon to be, at both elite colleges and its own institutions. (In Latin America many in the church feel that Opus priests served once ascendant oligarchs over the masses.) Even in the inner city, Opus is unabashedly less interested in identifying with the poor than turning them into the middle class. Bohlin jokingly distinguishes his members from "some Franciscans with holes in their shoes, driving a crummy car because of their sense of the spirit of poverty."

On the basis of their study of IRS filings, Allen and Harris found \$344.4 million in Opus assets in the U.S. and roughly estimate a global total of \$2.8 billion. If correct, that sum approximates Duke University's endowment, yet is hardly Vatican bailout money. But those figures are only part of the picture. Opus members and its sympathizers, known as "cooperators," can be very generous, and their funds hard to track. Allen's research suggests that a most likely unexpected \$60 million gift (a hefty portion of its total U.S. assets) financed much of the Manhattan building. Longlea, the group's Washington-area mansion, was donated by a couple who had just bought it for \$7.4 million. Father Michael Barrett, an Opus Dei priest who pastors a chapel in Houston, recently raised \$4.3 million for a new building and says, "I can assure you that

cooperators and supernumeraries have given at the \$100,000 level." That largesse, credited officially to the Galveston-Houston archdiocese, would not show up even on Allen's scrupulous balance sheet. Nor would similar Opus-generated funds.

HOW MUCH POWER DOES IT HAVE?

Some have said that Opus' true secret is its clout in international politics. Poland's new conservative regime includes an Opus minister and several Opus officials, according to one of the group's Warsaw directors; membership there is rumored to be a political stepping-stone. In Peru, Juan Luis Cardinal Cipriani, the church's first openly Opus Dei Cardinal, was seen as having sanctioned antiterrorist excesses by the regime of former President Alberto Fujimori; he scoffed at the accusations, writing that most human-rights groups were "fronts for Marxist and Maoist political movements."

For years, Catholics in Washington have kept informal count of possible high-profile Opus people, including Justice Antonin Scalia and almost-Justice Robert Bork, Senators Rick Santorum and Sam Brownback, columnist Robert Novak and former FBI head Louis Freeh. The tally was not totally arbitrary: Freeh's child went to an Opus Dei school, and his brother was a numerary for a while; Scalia's wife has attended Opus events, and the Justice is close to an Opus priest; and Brownback, Bork and Novak converted to Catholicism under one's wing. Several have denied the rumors ("I can't stress enough that he is not a member," says Santorum's communications chief). But a bonus of Opus' new candor campaign is that it now states freely that not one of the powerful Washingtonians belongs.

The more complicated question is what influence Opus Dei exerts on nonmembers. Says Bohlin: "We generally avoid talking about anything political, so as not to come down on one side or the other." Then he pauses. "But when you're talking about abortion, that's not a political issue. That's a Catholic issue," he says. "There are certain issues that we take a clear stand with the church on, and many of them are hot-button issues." Of course, you don't have to be Opus to oppose abortion, euthanasia or gay marriage. But the prelature, with an office on the capital's lobbyist-laden K Street, can act as a kind of validator to a broader spectrum of traditionalists. Scott Appleby, a Catholic history expert at Notre Dame, estimates that through programs for nonmembers and the articulate piety of its members, Opus Dei informs "about a million conservative Catholics." That's just 1.5% of the 67 million Catholics nationally, but it's a trove of motivated voters a politician can love, and may explain why Santorum has spoken at Opus events, in one case quoting Escrivá: "'Have you ever bothered to think how absurd it is to leave one's Catholicism aside on entering a professional association [or] Congress, as if you were checking your hat at the door?'"

DO MEMBERS REALLY WHIP THEMSELVES?

The man doing penance advised his associate to cover his head with a blanket; but the observer could not stop his ears. "Soon," said the witness, "I began to hear the forceful blows of his discipline ... there were more than a thousand terrible blows, precisely timed. The floor was covered in blood." That is not an early

Da Vinci Code draft. It is a description of Opus Dei founder Escrivá's routine by his eventual successor, quoted in a biography of Escrivá. Escrivá emphasized that others should not emulate his ferocity. But numeraries are expected, although not compelled, to wear a cilice, a small chain with inward-pointing spikes, around the upper thigh for two hours each day, and to flail themselves briefly weekly, with a small rope whip called a discipline.

With rare exceptions, even angry defectors don't cite self-mortification, as it's known, as their deal killer. Lucy, a former numerary assistant (see box, following page), told TIME it was "nothing. It's not like The Da Vinci Code." Catholic laity and luminaries, including Mother Teresa, have used it to identify with Christ's--and the world's--agony. San Antonio Archbishop José Gomez, an Opus member, notes self-mortification's tie to Opus' roots: "In the Hispanic culture," he says, "you look at the crucifixes, and they have a lot of blood. We are more used to sacrifice in the sense of physical suffering."

WHAT ABOUT RUMORS OF MIND CONTROL?

Self-mortification resonates with critics because, as Allen points out, it provides a metaphor for what they see as an "inhumane approach within Opus Dei, which demands a kind of dominance over its members, body and soul." Unnerving stories have been passed by ex-numeraries to journalists or posted to the anti-Opus website odan.org. Many involve charges of deceptive recruiting, with prospective members unaware that the events they are invited to are Opus', of numeraries' realizing only belatedly that Opus expects them to sign away their paycheck and curtail relations with their families. The music they play and the publications they read are allegedly controlled, and they must report their own and others' deviations as part of a system of "fraternal correction." Center directors are portrayed as little dictators. Complaining to local bishops is futile because of Opus' semi-independent status. The critics claim that when the numeraries try to leave, they are threatened with damnation. Experts who have helped extract the disaffected have likened center life to a cult. And Martin, the America editor, contends that he gets "dozens" of calls yearly from parents saying the group has estranged or brainwashed their numerary children.

Opus responds that those who leave are a small minority, and Allen describes the mood around the many centers he visited as cheerful. Bohlin dismisses charges that prospective members are unaware of what to expect, pointing out that all go through an 18-month preparatory process. He says that in a group as loosely knit as he claims Opus to be, "you can't keep all the people happy all the time; you can't keep people from making mistakes." And he says the organization has mellowed. "I was running a center as a 25-year-old," Bohlin, now 51, notes. "At this point, we hopefully have more mature people. A green organization is different from one with more experience." To those who have been hurt, he says, "the only thing we can do is try to apologize and hope people understand, and you move on with your life." WHAT IS ITS FUTURE?

Prior to last year's Papal election, rumor held that Opus might end up brokering the conclave, but it turned out Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger did not need a broker. And the new Pope may be less concerned with aiding Opus than with strengthening the church's hierarchy. Nonetheless, Opus' second in command, Fernando

Ocáriz, worked closely with Ratzinger on one of his last great conservative gestures as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: Dominus Jesus, a reassertion of the primacy of Catholicism over other religions. Other members are "consultors" to that key office, and Opus' canon lawyers saturate Rome. Asserts John Navone, a Jesuit theologian at Gregorian University: "They're in the forefront of the Vatican."

Opus' future in the U.S. is more complicated. Recently, on the 16th floor of the New York headquarters, 40 men did a guided contemplation. Two-thirds were visitors, some "meeting the Work" for the first time. While they sat, eyes closed, an Opus member intoned questions for them to ponder. "Do I realize that Christian life means finding and following Christ closely, no matter what the cost?" he asked: "Am I waging a generous inner struggle?" "Do I find in my work many opportunities for small sacrifices?" "Do I restrain my curiosity?"

That last one is a particularly telling query. Restraint of curiosity is not a virtue much trumpeted in the West today. That may help explain both why Opus' membership levels appear to have remained static in the U.S. over the past few decades and, perhaps, why it has attracted so much negative energy. "I don't believe Opus Dei is either a [cult] or a mafia or a cabal," a senior prelate of another religious community in Rome told TIME. It is just that "their approach is preconiliar. They originated prior to the Second Vatican Council, and they don't want to dialogue with society as they find it." That would not describe the majority of self-identifying American Catholics, who are distinctly postconciliar, with more than 75% opposing the birth-control ban. Their sympathy for Opus Dei might be limited. Some might even feel hostile toward it: church liberals, once riding high, have understood for decades that Rome does not incline their way. They feel abandoned, says Allen, "and whenever you feel that way, there's a natural desire to find someone to blame."

If that is the case--if much of the negative feeling regarding Opus at this point is displaced anger over the direction of the church--then The Da Vinci Code may be the best fate that could befall it. The movie will not deter Opus' usual constituency--conservative Catholics do not look to Ron Howard for guidance. But by forcing Opus into greater transparency, the film could aid it: if the organization is as harmless and "mature" as Bohlin contends, then such exposure could bring in a bumper crop of devotees--with perhaps even more to come if, as seems likely, American Catholicism becomes both more Hispanic and more conservative.

That is the kind of outcome Julian Cardinal Herranz, Opus' ranking Vatican official, expects. Long ago, he says, when he was editing a university newspaper, someone submitted a story claiming that Opus Dei was part of a worldwide conspiracy. Fascinated, Herranz began talking to Opus members, eventually becoming one himself. "That article I read was fiction," he says. "And now I'm here. I became a priest, I came to Rome, I became a bishop, and now a Cardinal. All because I read a fictional story about Opus Dei."

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