

**CARNEGIE COUNCIL**  
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## Opus Dei: The First Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church

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Opus Dei

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### Introduction

**JOANNE MYERS:** Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us this morning as we welcome John Allen, our fifth speaker in our series on Religion and Politics. Today he will be discussing [Opus Dei: The First Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church](#).

Any organization shrouded in secrecy casts a powerful spell over the imagination. Clandestine societies often inspire fantasies about their hidden powers that only sometimes accord with reality. For example, if you have read Dan Brown's [The Da Vinci Code](#), I believe you might associate the words "Opus Dei" with an image of an albino Alsatian monk named Silas, or the mysterious and haunting "Teacher." But even though this is a work of fiction, it is a book which leaves us with the impression that Opus Dei has all of the characteristics of a sinister cult; a cult which is obsessed with secrecy; cultivates a narrow and rigid spirituality, is hypersensitive to criticism, and manifests an elitism that empowers its members to regard themselves as the loyal Catholics who will do almost anything to defend their traditionalist view of what they believe to be the one true Catholic Church.

While in the end some may find their views intriguing, others will find their beliefs and behavior to be not only disturbing but malevolent as well. Yet, unlike Dan Brown's controversial book *The Da Vinci Code*, John Allen's *Opus Dei* is a serious journalistic analysis. It is an attempt to provide unique insights and to expose some of the more wild rumors surrounding the spiritual organization which was founded in Spain in 1928 by [Saint Josemaria Escrivá](#) to do God's work.

There is no question that our speaker today in writing his book *Opus Dei* has succeeded in his own work at being an extremely good investigative journalist. Mr. Allen's research has involved over 300 hours of interviews with both friends and enemies of the 85,000-plus member organization. He traveled to Italy, Spain, Africa, Latin America, and the United States, where he was granted unlimited access to the prelate who heads the organization and to high-ranking officials. He was given private correspondence from the organization's archives, and he gained access to Opus Dei centers throughout the world. Because of this exhaustive research, Mr. Allen gives us a first-rate sociological study of Opus Dei and reveals far more than has ever been revealed before.

Our guest this morning is a widely respected Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* and is also a regular contributor to CNN and National Public Radio. As author of [The Rise of Benedict XVI](#) and [All the Pope's Men: The Inside Story of How the Vatican Really Thinks](#), his commitment to objective reporting is well known. In fact, it is because of his balanced approach that his Internet column, "The Word from Rome," is considered by knowledgeable observers to be the best single source of insights on Vatican affairs in the English language.

So just what is the truth about Opus Dei? Is it actually doing the quiet work of His Holiness, or is it a human instrument of power and control, out to effect a covert and hostile takeover of the Church?

For the answers, please join me in giving a very warm welcome to a man who will distinguish the institution from the message, separate fact from fiction, and in the end will unravel the mysteries about this controversial and puzzling force within the Catholic Church. Our guest today, John Allen. Thank you for joining us.

### Remarks

**JOHN ALLEN:** Thank you. Good morning. Let me just make a couple of observations on the basis of that very gracious introduction. First of all, you should know that there is actually a member of Opus Dei named Silas. However, unfortunately, he's a short black guy, as opposed to an albino monk roaming the earth in search of the enemies of the Church.

Secondly, it is of course true that I wrote a book called *The Rise of Benedict XVI*, and I was actually asked just before this talk if the Holy Father had had any reaction to the book. I can pass along to you the message that indeed he did.

You should know about this book that it was a sort of tripartite effort. The first was the last days of [John Paul II](#). The second component was the story of the Conclave for the election of [Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger](#) as Pope. The third was a kind of projection of where this pontificate is going to go.

Now, the Holy Father read the book over his summer vacation in Val d'Aosta in the north of Italy, and then sent back a message through his spokesperson, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, saying, "Would you please thank Herr Allen for having written this book, among other things, because he has discussed the future of my pontificate, saving me the trouble of thinking about it for myself." So whatever else you may think, at least the Holy Father has a sense of humor.

I'm delighted to be here with you this morning to talk about the subject of Opus Dei. What I would like to do first of all, is say just a couple of brief words about the perspective I bring to the subject; give you some essentials about Opus Dei, a sort of Opus Dei 101 if you like; talk about a couple of the most common controversies that have surrounded Opus Dei; and then perhaps, given the particular interest of this audience, say just a couple of words about the foreign policy, so to speak, that is the political concerns of the Holy See, and how groups such as Opus Dei might fit into that.

First, to begin, the perspective I bring. I am what the Italians call a *Vaticanista*, which means that it is my full-time professional work to follow the goings-on in this 108-acre island of ecclesiastical life in the heart of Rome that we call the Vatican.

Concretely, that means that when a visiting dignitary is in to see the Holy Father, often I go up to the papal apartment to cover the event. Most recently, I was there for the farewell visit of Prime Minister Kwasniewski from Poland just last Friday. It means I travel when the Pope travels, so I traveled to twenty-five countries with John Paul II, and on and on. Concretely, I think what that allows me to do is see some of the complexities of the Vatican and the Universal Church.

I'd like to tell you a very quick anecdote to drive that point home. You may know that when the Pope travels, he does so in a dual capacity. He is both, of course, a head of state—the Holy See is a sovereign entity in international law that exchanges ambassadors with 174 countries and international organizations. He is also, of course, the head of the Catholic Church. So when he arrives in a foreign

country, he is welcomed twice: once in a very formal setting, usually by the president or prime minister of the host country; again, usually in a much less formal setting, on behalf of the local Church, often by the President of the Bishops Conference; by the Primate, if this country has a historical Primate; and in some cases, if it's a very small country, by the Papal Nuncio—that's the Pope's ambassador in that country.

This particular story is set on a trip to Eastern Europe, to a country that had a very, very small Catholic community. It's actually Azerbaijan, which has all of 114 Catholics. I ran the math, and it would have actually been four times less expensive to bring all of those Catholics to Rome than to bring the Holy Father to Azerbaijan. But in any event, obviously that wasn't the point.

The greeting for the Holy Father, the second greeting in this case, was delivered by the Pope's Nuncio, who is a very lovely Italian monsignor, a wonderful man, but has a reputation—and I have to tell you it's a well-deserved reputation— as a bit of a windbag; that is, he goes on and on, and often, the mystery is, without saying very much.

On this particular day, I actually clocked his greeting for the Holy Father at forty minutes. Bear in mind, ladies and gentlemen, this is a twenty-four-hour trip. We actually thought the Holy Father would be back in Rome before this guy was done welcoming him. I happened to be in the pool covering the welcome, so I was at the end of one row of seats. Immediately across the aisle was the *seguito*, the papal entourage, the cardinals and other Vatican officials who travel with the Pope. So I was more or less immediately next to a very senior Vatican cardinal—a man I know, I've interviewed him several times. I could tell as this oration was winding on that our cardinal friend was becoming increasingly frustrated. I mean you can tell these things. You don't have to be a genius. His breathing was becoming heavy, eyes were rolling in the back of his head, and veins were throbbing on his forehead, and so forth.

And so, at a certain stage, I felt I needed to give him an opportunity to vent. So I leaned into the cardinal and I said to him, "Cardinal, what do you think?" Well, there was this sort of nanosecond of hesitation, where you could tell he was calculating, "Should I say this; should I not say it?" but it was obvious he needed to get this off his chest. So, in sotto voce fashion, he leaned into me and, looking up at this monsignor going on and on and saying nothing, the cardinal whispered to me, "You realize that some Italian village is missing its idiot."

[Laughter.]

Now, in addition to being a once-in-a-career punch line, this anecdote makes a valuable point, which is that only seen from afar could the Vatican look like a "Stepford Wives" environment in which everyone looks alike and dresses alike and thinks alike and acts alike. The truth is it is much more polychrome than that. There are many different personalities, temperaments, styles, outlooks, visions, and so on. I hope what my experience enables me to do is to bring some of that complexity to bear.

I want to do that on the subject of Opus Dei as well, because I think Opus Dei is a topic that is so often dealt with through the prism of myth and sweeping overgeneralization. That is, I think the conversation about Opus Dei often generates far more heat than light.

I hope what we can do today, I hope what I was able to accomplish in the book, is bring a somewhat more complex, and I think nuanced, approach to the subject. In terms of the importance of this subject, let me just very quickly say that in addition to the vast public fascination with this organization, most prominently carried of course in *The Da Vinci Code*—and that would sort of be the journalistic motive for tackling this project—let me just say a brief word about my motivation as a Catholic for turning my attention to this subject.

I think the truth is that inside the Catholic Church we often have a problem with sustaining rational conversation across party lines. The Catholic Church is, I think, in too many ways today, a house divided against itself. My hunch about this subject was that if we can clear a space in which we can have a patient, rational, understanding conversation on this subject, then it could be a model for how we could do so on any number of other contentious topics. That said, let me give you a few basic points about

Opus Dei that I think will help our understanding.

As was said in the introduction, Opus Dei was founded in Madrid, in Spain, in October 1928, on the Feast of the Guardian Angels, by a Spanish priest by the name of Josemaria Escrivá. I think it is important to contextualize what was going on in European Catholicism at that moment. In addition to the fact of the intra-Spanish context, that this was the run-up to the civil war, I think the broader context was there was great ferment in the Catholic Church in the early 20th century about what was seen as—and I think rightly so—a growing gap between the Church and secular modernity; in other words, this tendency to think of religion—"Catholicity," if you like—as a kind of private compartmentalized experience, that, whatever it might mean to the individual believer, had precious little relevance to the broader cultural context—the political debate, economic systems, and so on. There were a number of organizations in the Catholic Church, and creative thinkers in the Catholic Church, that were trying to imagine ways to breach that gap. I think that's the context in which the foundation on which Opus Dei needs to be located.

Escrivá's vision—which, of course, according to his testimony and the tradition of Opus Dei, was a vision revealed to him by God—was the creation of a core of Catholic laity who would be well formed in the spirituality and doctrine of the Catholic Church and then would take that formation and apply it to whatever path of life they happened to find themselves in. So you would have lay Catholic bankers and lay Catholic politicians and lay Catholic architects and teachers and bus drivers and bakers and so on, who would see the ordinary details of their daily work not merely as an opportunity for their own sanctification—that is, making themselves holy—but as an opportunity for transforming the world.

In other words, the idea was that if we want to change secular modernity, we cannot do it from the outside, with a clerical cast wagging its finger at lay people and exhorting them to do moral things; it had to be done from the inside-out, by people who were in and of the secular world, imagining a Christian vision of what secularity and secular modernity might look like and then bringing it about.

Now, as obvious as that may seem with the benefit of seventy years of experience, I think it's worth saying that this was a direct frontal challenge to much of Catholic spirituality and much of Catholic attitudes towards the secular world at the time. Let me make two points.

First, it was a challenge to the kind of clericalist ethos that was, I think, overwhelming, particularly in Spanish Catholicism at the time, in which the clergy were seen as the primary actors in the drama of redemption, and the role of laity was, in the classic formula, to pray, pay, and obey.

Escrivá turned that directly on its head. He said: "No. The clergy are a supporting cast, they are at best a support system, and the real work of redemption and transformation, sanctification, has to be done by laity who are fully immersed in the highways and byways of modern life and bringing a Christian spirit to it." In that sense, I think we can fairly say that Escrivá was in a way a prophet, a visionary, of [the Second Vatican Council](#), which would of course arrive in Catholicism in the mid-1960s, which would herald in the era of the laity.

It has been fairly said that, whatever Opus Dei's profile today may be, however traditionalist or conservative one may see it as, at least in this sense there is no question that they were ahead of the curve in terms of announcing and embracing a much more active and dynamic vision of the lay role.

Secondly, the other sense in which Opus Dei, I think, in Escrivá's vision, was an inversion of what was traditional Catholic thinking is he insisted that the modern street or the boardroom or the assembly hall of a parliament is every bit as religious an environment as a church building. In other words, if you want to have a religious vocation, you do not have to retreat into a monastery; quite the contrary, you can be a seriously engaged, deeply committed, religious person and see in a sense the sacrifice of your work at a board table as every bit as important, as every bit as crucial, an act of sanctification, as the sacrifice that a priest performs on the altar when he consecrates the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This, too, was very much a challenge to what was contemporary spiritual understanding inside the Catholic Church of his day.

I think it's important to make these points, because my observation is that in much public discussion

about Opus Dei we concentrate—I think legitimately so—on matters that are in many ways peripheral to Opus Dei's core message—that is, debates over Opus Dei's money or power or the role of women or corporal mortification. Again, there is a perfectly legitimate conversation to be had about these topics, but the risk is that we miss what Opus Dei actually purports to be about.

The analogy that I came up with in the course of my research is that most writing and journalistic commentary on Opus Dei is similar to doing a book on General Motors without mentioning that they make cars. In other words, you're not quite getting to the core of what this organization is all about.

Now, having said all of that, let me then turn a couple of those controversies. Obviously, I can't pretend to be all-embracing—we could spend considerably more time than we have talking about all of the different question marks and myths and concerns about Opus Dei that have grown up over the years. What I want to do is pick up a couple that I think are representative, and then, obviously, I'm happy to respond to any questions you have.

In my experience, in looking at the most common public controversies surrounding Opus Dei, I think you can separate them into two categories. There are those concerns that dissolve upon contact—that is, once you take a hard look at them, they go away. Then, there are those that, even after you have made a sustained, deliberate effort to try to understand it from the inside-out, rational, well-meaning people without an axe to grind are going to draw very different conclusions.

I want to offer you an example of each. First, let's talk about Opus Dei's wealth. As you undoubtedly are aware, there is a public perception that Opus Dei is an enormously wealthy organization, sitting on secret bags of cash, and that over the years this has generated conspiracy theories, such as that Opus Dei bailed out the Vatican Bank in the late 1970s when it was, to put it euphemistically, "having difficulties"; and that Opus Dei funneled money to [Solidarity](#) in Poland, and in so doing essentially bought the allegiance of the future Pope, John Paul II.

It's easy enough to understand where perceptions like this come from. If you have ever been, for example, to the Opus Dei headquarters here in New York, at 34th and Lexington, that seventeen-story building jokingly known as "the tower of power," it is a fairly imposing edifice and it is fairly sumptuously appointed when you poke around inside. So you understand where the perceptions come from.

But what we did in this book, for the first time, is actually run the numbers. So let me tell you what the numbers are and then try to put them in some context for you.

The primary Opus Dei operations around the world are what are known inside Opus Dei as "corporate works," that is, activities for which Opus Dei guarantees the spiritual and doctrinal formation. This includes a series of universities, schools, hospitals, social service centers, and so on.

In the United States, if you add up the cash value of all of those Opus Dei operations—that is, the total assets of everything that is connected to Opus Dei in the country—you arrive at a figure of \$344 million. If you do the same thing for the globe—that is, the cash value of all of Opus Dei's activities around the world—and here I have to say that while that \$344 million is a hard number, because of the differences in accounting requirements in various parts of the world, the global number is a best guess. But I think we intentionally crafted this as the most liberal estimate possible—in other words, this is the most it could possibly be—the amount is \$2.8 billion. That is, in essence, the value of what Opus Dei owns.

Now let's try to put that in some kind of context. The cash value of the assets of the Archdiocese of Chicago in the United States is \$2.5 billion. In other words, Opus Dei worldwide owns roughly what the Archdiocese of Chicago by itself in the United States has.

To take another example, there is a lay Catholic organization in the United States called the Knights of Columbus that has an insurance program that by itself is capitalized at a value of more than \$6 billion. In other words, the Knights of Columbus insurance program is two-and-a-half times wealthier than Opus Dei's total set of assets.

Now, I think it's important to say this because there are all kinds of impressions—I think terribly exaggerated impressions—about Opus Dei's wealth. For example, there was a book in the early 1990s that suggested that Opus Dei operated a financial empire that rivaled General Motors. Well, ladies and gentlemen, last year General Motors reported assets of \$455 billion. By that standard, Opus Dei simply does not compete.

And if I were to run through for you other common perceptions of Opus Dei—such as its influence in secular politics, its influence inside the Catholic Church, its much-vaunted recruiting machinery—I think what we would find is a similar pattern, which is, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, there's not much there there. In other words, to be honest, this is a group that has a much more modest sociological, political, and financial profile than overheated, feverish imaginations sometimes suggest.

Let's shift to category two; that is, questions about which at the end of the day there still remain legitimate debate, legitimate diversity of opinion. Any number of things we could talk about here.

But let me pick up what is usually the very first question I am asked, in the Anglo-Saxon world at least, by media, which is Opus Dei's practice of corporal mortification, or to put it in lay terms, self-inflicted pain. There are two forms of this corporal mortification practiced by Opus Dei members.

Now, I should say before I get into that that there are different kinds of Opus Dei members. They have 85,000 members worldwide. I suppose the basic difference is between **numeraries**, who are celibate Opus Dei members who live in Opus Dei centers; and **supernumeraries**, who are typically married, have families, have jobs in the outside world, and so on. The supernumeraries are about 70 percent of Opus Dei's total membership; the numeraries are 20 percent; then there are about 1,800 Opus Dei priests, which are about 10 percent of the total membership.

It is the celibate members of Opus Dei, meaning the numeraries and priests, who practice these forms of corporal mortification. In other words, it's a minority of Opus Dei's total membership that do these things.

As I say, there are two. One is something called the cilice, which is a sort of barbed chain that is tied around the upper thigh and is worn for two hours a day every day except Sunday. Then there is a discipline, which is a small cloth whip that is administered to the back once a week, usually while reciting a prayer, the "Our Father," or something like that.

Now, let me say, contrary to what you may have read in *The Da Vinci Code*, these things do not break the skin; they do not cause massive bleeding. They do not whip you into frenzies of spiritual exaltation. For this book I wore the cilice for my mandatory two hours, and I did try the discipline briefly. I can tell you, while they are uncomfortable, I didn't find them exceptionally painful. To be honest with you, when my wife will goad me into going to the gym to try and run a mile, I find that a lot more uncomfortable than either of these two things.

Having said that, let me try to explain how Opus Dei understands the spiritual logic. In other words, why do it? It is three-fold. The first is to remind one in a physical way of the consequences of sin. The second is to identify with the suffering in the world. The third is to identify oneself with the suffering of Christ on the cross.

It should be said about this that these are practices with a rich pedigree in Catholic spirituality. Great saints of the Church, past and present, have done these things, from Dominic and Francis in the 12th and 13th centuries to in the 20th century people such as [Padre Pio](#), [Pope Paul VI](#), [Mother Teresa](#)—all of them engaged in these practices. Prior to the Second Vatican Council, these were, I think, almost universally practiced inside Catholic seminaries and religious orders and so on.

Nevertheless, in the post-Vatican II period, they have been, I would say, largely abandoned in mainstream Catholic life. I suppose the primary reason has been concern about the potential for abuse. That is, I think it is somewhat seductive for an idealistic young person to believe that if a little bit of pain

is good, then a lot of it must be great, and so there is this tendency to push towards excess.

Now, Opus Dei members will tell you—and I think they are telling the truth, in my experience—that they are very vigilant about that sort of thing, that they are very careful to insist that this must be done in moderation.

They also say that, frankly, these two practices are a very minor piece of the broader picture of mortification—that is, a kind of denial of self and sacrifice for others—as they understand it. I mean they will always say that going without a cup of coffee, or taking out the garbage when it is not your turn, is just as valid a form of mortification, and that, frankly, you could take away these two things, that is the cilice and the discipline, without changing very much about Opus Dei's spiritual understanding and spiritual practice.

Again, I will tell you that, having said all that, at the end of the day, there still are a lot of people—and again I say rational, well-meaning people, who have no fight to pick with Opus Dei—who will still find these practices hard to understand and hard to accept, either at an aesthetic level, since they will just find them kind of repugnant; or they will find them, frankly, self-destructive, and therefore just very difficult to get their minds around. I think in that sense—and there are any number of other examples—Opus Dei is, to some extent, a sign of contraction; that is, it is deliberately, self-consciously swimming against the tide of much contemporary Catholic opinion, to say nothing of the thought patterns and presumptions of the broader secular world.

We could talk about money and women, and I'm happy to answer questions, but I want to leave the controversies there. Let me finally end by saying just a couple of words about the Pope, politics, and Opus Dei, and then field questions.

Let me flag for you, first of all, if you have not seen it, a classic expression of the political philosophy of Pope Benedict XVI. Yesterday the Pope issued his message for the World Day of Peace. The World Day of Peace is a custom that was founded by Pope Paul VI. Every year on January 1st, the Catholic Church observes what it calls the World Day of Peace. Paul VI chose January 1st because it is a secular, not a religious, holiday, and the concept was to show that this is the Church's outreach to all men and women of goodwill, rather than a specifically Catholic feast or observance.

Of course, yesterday's was Benedict XVI's first message, and I think it was really programmatic in terms of his approach to political questions. I think it's fascinating if you compare the message of Benedict XVI and Paul VI. Paul VI was the Pope who coined the phrase "if you want peace, work for justice." In other words, he establishes a very clear link between the possibility for peace in the world and solving the problems of social justice that are often at the roots of the resentment that leads to violence.

Benedict's message was subtly different. The linkage he was interested in in yesterday's message was the relationship between peace and truth. His argument was that we cannot genuinely have peace in the world, we cannot have order and stability and a just ordering of global affairs, if we do not first recognize that there is such a thing as objective truth that sets limits to power, establishes patterns for what the meaning and purpose of individual human existence is and also human societies and cultures. I think that is reflective of this Pope's *cri de coeur* to the modern world.

You may remember on April 18th, the day that the Conclave opened that elected Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as Pope, he gave a memorable homily, in his role as the Dean of the College of Cardinals, in which he clearly outlined what he sees as the central crisis facing humanity today, which is what he called "a dictatorship of relativism," this notion that in contemporary Western culture we have embraced the idea that truth is relative—you know, you have your truths, I have mine; they're all equally valid—which, from the Pope's point of view, sounds terribly seductive, but in the end he believes that it issues in chaos.

Bear in mind, of course, this is a man who grew up under Hitler's shadow in Nazi Germany, and I think he believes he learned in first person the risks when the state replaces truth with lies. Therefore, I think he feels passionately the need to reassert the idea of objective truth.



I think this illustrates something about the Pope's political philosophy in this sense. There was a belief in some quarters that when Ratzinger was elected, the papacy to some extent was going to collapse in on itself and tend to the Catholic Church's internal business, and sort of disengage from the broader hustle and bustle of global affairs.

John Paul II, of course, as you know, was a political titan of his day. I think you would probably have to reach back to [Innocent III](#) in the 12th and 13th centuries to find a pope who was as politically consequential as John Paul II was.

Many people expected a sharp contrast under Benedict XVI. I think, in fact, we are seeing precisely the opposite. We are seeing very clearly that Benedict XVI wants a mobilized, engaged, relevant—political cash value, if you like, of the Christian message.

To date, in these first eight months, we have seen Benedict take a very clear role, for example, in the Italian referendum campaign on *in vitro* fertilization. The Italian bishops mobilized to oppose this proposal to liberalize the country's *in vitro* laws, which are the toughest in Europe. The Pope clearly backed that effort, and the Italian bishops won. Although the footnote to that is they won by persuading people not to vote, and in my experience persuading Italians not to do something is like shooting fish in a barrel. But in any event, there we are.

The Pope also mobilized very clearly to support the Spanish bishops in their efforts to try to block that country's liberal gay marriage law. That, of course, is a campaign the Church ultimately lost.

We have seen the Pope also, in a variety of different ways, indicate that, above all, on the cultural issues, that are the front-burner issues in the developed West—issues such as homosexuality, stem cell research, abortion, and so on—that he intends to be a dynamically engaged, relevant leader of the Roman Catholic community.

What does that mean for groups such as Opus Dei? Well, I think we can say this. First of all, I think it needs to be clearly understood that Opus Dei, as such, professes—and I think honestly so—to have no political agenda of its own. That is to say, the catch-phrase inside Opus Dei is "to serve the Church as the Church wishes to be served." So they have no agenda, they will tell you, beyond the teaching of the Church. In my experience, by and large that holds up. On most questions, you will observe rather striking pluralism inside Opus Dei.

I think one of the classic examples was in Spain in the lead-up to the Iraq war. You will remember, of course, that the [Aznar](#) government in Spain entered the Iraq war alongside the United States in the Coalition. The Minister of Defense in Aznar's government, Trillo, was actually an Opus Dei supernumerary, and he was, in a sense, the architect of the Spanish engagement in that war. One of his fiercest critics in the Spanish press was an Opus Dei numerary, who almost on a daily basis was accusing Trillo of leading Spain into the war on the basis on outright lies. I think that fairly mirrored the division of opinion inside Opus Dei in Spain and in other parts of the world.

So on most issues, I think it is difficult to find an Opus Dei agenda. But on these cultural issues, because the catechism of the Catholic Church provides clear answers on these questions, and because the emphasis inside Opus Dei on thinking with the Church is so strong, you will find, I think, an overwhelming uniformity around these issues.

Further, because of Escrivá's emphasis on the need for the Christians and the need for members of Opus Dei to bring their faith to the affairs of the secular world, you will find a disproportionate number of members inside Opus Dei who, in one way or another, are deeply engaged on political questions. This means that on these cultural issues, by and large, Opus Dei is going to be—and I think fairly can be described as—a strong force for "conservative" positions, that is, what we would conventionally think of as conservative positions.

In that sense, I think that Opus Dei—and certainly not just Opus Dei; other groups inside the Catholic



Church—will be seen by Benedict XVI as, in a sense, instruments of his foreign policy. You have to know this about Benedict XVI, that to some extent, in contrast with John Paul II, Benedict is, I think fairly we could say, a bit more of a realist, particularly about what a mass phenomenon Catholicism is likely to be in the current epoch.

John Paul II, as you may know, was a bit of a poet and a dreamer; he believed that the third millennium would be a millennium of what he called "the new evangelism," a new awakening of Christianity as a mass phenomenon around the world. I think Benedict XVI perhaps has his feet planted a bit more on the ground, and really does not expect a kind of mass reawakening of Christianity. His preferred image for Christianity in this day and age is as a creative minority; that is, recognizing that Christianity is unlikely to be in any broad sense a culture-shaping phenomenon. What he is interested in is promoting what he calls "islands of life"—that is, however small they may be, groups of believers who are on fire with the faith and driven with this kind of passion to apply that faith to the issues of the day.

In that sense, I think he will see, and does see, groups such as Opus Dei as classic examples of that model, of a kind of engaged, coherent, driven, animated, relevant form of Roman Catholic Christianity. So I think in that sense we can expect that Opus Dei—and again, I say other groups such as Opus Dei in the Church—will continue to be not merely inward-directed groups promoting a particular form of Catholic spirituality, but will also continue to be relevant social forces, carrying forward this agenda if you like, or this political concern, of this pontificate, and supported certainly with all the tools that the pontificate has at its disposal. I guess what I'm trying to say is that Opus Dei, and other groups like it, are going to matter under this pontificate.

Let me bring this to a close and see what questions you have. But let me end by saying this. I think as we try to think our way through the role and the nature of Opus Dei and the controversies that surround it, again I would urge us to try to do so not through the filter of *a priori* conceptions that come to us from hither and yon, but try to take our cues from reality and from direct experience.

Let me just tell a very quick story that I think may make that point. This one, rather than a papal trip, is actually set in a jungle. The story goes like this. One day the lion is feeling in a particularly self-assertive mood, so he goes out walking. First he sees a monkey. He says to the monkey, "Hey you, who's in charge of this jungle?" The monkey says, "Why, of course, you are, Mr. Lion." The lion says, "That's right, and don't you forget it."

Then he sees the serpent slithering through the trees. The lion says, "Hey you, who's running this jungle?" The serpent says, "Well, of course, you are, Your Majesty." The lion says, "Of course, that's right."

It goes on like that. And then, finally, the lion sees the bull elephant. He walks up to the bull elephant and he says, "Hey you, who's running this jungle?" The bull elephant looks down at him, with this sort of expression of bemused condescension, picks him up with his trunk, whirls him around in the air, brings him crashing back down on his head, and then slowly lumbers away. The lion picks himself up, dusts himself off, and as the elephant is walking away, he shouts out after him, "You know, just because you don't know the answer is no reason to get an attitude."

Classic example of seeing what you want to see. I think this is probably a particular temptation in Catholic affairs. I mean, not for nothing have so many of our popes been known as Leo. So my concluding exhortation, my *fortorino* if you will, would be let's take our cues from experience and from reality rather than from myth and from ideology.

Thank you very much.

**JOANNE MYERS:** I'd like to open the floor to questions.

### Questions and Answers

**QUESTION:** Thank you very much. That was amazing and very interesting. I have two questions.

Do you think in this modern world of today, with the conflicts within the Church, there will be a spinoff within the Church—like in Judaism, with Reformed, Conservative, and Orthodox—and they will all be considered Catholics, but they will have a different relationship with the Vatican?

My second question is: Why isn't there more documentation published or more public knowledge about where the present Pope was during World War II and his history of what he did and where he was? I read in the paper that he was part of Nazi Youth, but they don't say where he was or what he did.

**JOHN ALLEN:** Well, the danger of that second question is that I've written a 500-page biography of Joseph Ratzinger, so we could be here all morning just with that question. But I promise you we won't be.

To take the first question, is there going to be some kind of split inside Roman Catholicism, formally speaking, I would say no. If you look at Church history, to have a schism you need bishops to lead it. I don't personally see at the present moment any bishop who is willing to lead a constituency in a formal schism with Rome. The last time this happened, of course, was in 1988, when a French archbishop by the name of [Marcel Lefebvre](#), who was an opponent to some of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, consecrated for the bishops in defiance of the Vatican, triggering a formal schism. I don't think anything like that is likely to reoccur.

But I do think, if we look at this sociologically rather than ecclesiologically, what we can observe is there are any number of informal schisms inside Roman Catholicism, which absent some dramatic new idea of how to address the situation, are likely to fester.

The truth is, if you look around at Roman Catholicism today—and this is true in a particularly exaggerated form inside the United States—what we have are multiple Catholicisms. There are the liturgical traditionalist Catholics, and there are the social justice Catholics, and there are the neoconservative intellectual Catholics, and there are the Church reform Catholics.

The sad reality, I think, and one of the great tragedies of American Catholic history in the 20th century, is that we Catholics spent the first half of the 20th century clawing our way out of the ghetto that was imposed upon us by a hostile Protestant majority, and we have spent the second part of the 20th century reconstructing ideological ghettos of our own choosing.

So the reality now is that when Catholics poke their heads above these ghetto walls and they see the "other," what they often do is they see that other through what I would call the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that is, "Is this other person a potential rival, is this other person really Catholic at all, and are they in fact an enemy of the kind of version of Catholic identity to which I would cling?"

I think, therefore, we have a really terrible problem, in terms of being able to, first of all, communicate with one another; and then, secondly, being able to understand ourselves in the first place as part of the broad Catholic community, and in the second place as Catholics that pertain to a particular subgroup. I think the reality is often it is the inverse—you know, we identify with a subgroup first and the broader community second. I wish I could tell you I have a silver-bullet solution to that problem. I don't. What I have as an instinct is that it is a problem. A succession of popes has said that the Church is supposed to be a community of communities. The reality is that the first part of that formula is missing, that spirit of broad community.

I would add to that there is another layer to that problem that also affects those of us in the United States, which is I also think American Catholics have a hard time understanding and accepting that we are inserted into a global family of faith.

You know, ladies and gentlemen, there are 1.1 billion Roman Catholics in the world. There are 65 million in the United States. We are 6 percent of the global Catholic population. We are the fourth-largest Catholic country in the world, after Brazil, Mexico, and the Philippines

Increasingly, the north-south shift in global Christianity means that pastoral and intellectual energy is not going to be coming from Catholic University or from the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago; it is going

to be coming from Jakarta and from Manila and from Buenos Aires and from Lagos.

That is going to reconfigure Catholic debates in a lot of different ways. I think one of them is going to be precisely on the issues of sexual morality—you know, the culture wars—that tend to be so preoccupying for us in this part of the world. Because the truth is in most of the so-called developing world—at least within the Catholic community, and other branches of Christianity as well—there is a much more traditional sexual ethic than tends to prevail in mainstream Christian thinking, or at least in so-called mainstream Christian thinking, here in the West.

If you want a test case for that, look at the reaction to the Vatican's recent document on gay priests. This was a huge story here. It was a complete non-story in Latin America, in Asia, and in Africa, because it struck Catholic opinion, broadly speaking, in those parts of the world as nothing more than common sense. You can draw different conclusions about that, but as an observation that's the reality.

This is going to be, I think, a real gut check for a lot of American Catholics. Are we willing to accept that we are part of a global family of faith? Are we willing to accept that that means we are not always going to get our own way?

So I think, in response to your question, there are a lot of fissures that are operating in Catholic life today, and I think the trajectory is they are going to become deeper, more profound. We are going to become a more fractured community. I don't think that is going to issue in a formal schism; I think that is going to issue in just informal dysfunction, absent some kind of creative imagination of how to deal with that.

I'll come to your second question about Ratzinger and the war. Basically the facts are these. Ratzinger was born in a small Bavarian town on the border of Austria, called Markt am Inn. His father was a policeman. Broadly speaking, they were part of the Austrian and Francophile current in Bavaria, which means that, for one thing, they were always skeptical about the Prussians and they were skeptical about hegemony from the German north, which predisposed them to be skeptical of the Nazis just to begin with.

Secondly, because of the *Kulturkampf* and the perception that the Nazis were hostile to the Catholic Church, I think, from the very beginning, the Ratzinger family was what you would call anti-Nazi. His father actually took a succession of demotions in order to stay away from the Nazis, and then took early retirement in order not to be enlisted in the party.

In 1941, when membership in the Hitler Youth became mandatory for anyone who was in a German gymnasium—that is, roughly speaking, a high school—Ratzinger was briefly enrolled, but never picked up his membership card. In fact, he went to a sympathetic teacher and said, "Can I still come to school if I don't go to the meetings and I don't participate?" This teacher was willing to look the other way and allowed that to happen.

Now, I should add that I made this point in my book. When the Pope was elected of course, and there was fascination with this question, it was much discussed. My book actually ended up on "The Daily Show," Jon Stewart's comedy program, "Comedy Central," in which he said, "We can report that Ratzinger's affiliation with the Nazi party has been overestimated, and proof of that is John Allen's book, in which he documents the crates of unsold Hitler Youth cookies in the Ratzinger basement."

I think the point is he was very briefly and involuntarily a member of the Hitler Youth. He was later conscripted into the Germany Army. He spent some time in an anti-aircraft battalion outside Munich, and then he was sent to the German-Hungarian border to lay tank traps for the advancing Red Army.

He has said in his memoirs, which are called "milestones" in English, that he never fired a gun during the course of the war. He did eventually desert and briefly spent a few months in an American prisoner-of-war camp. Among other things, he is the first pope in the history of the Catholic Church to have been in an American jail.

**QUESTION:** John, you briefly alluded to John Paul's relations with Opus Dei. Can you expand on that, because the perception is—I'm not talking about the financial thing—that he elevated Opus Dei and many members, starting from Navarro-Valls, into prominent positions. How would you characterize his whole approach to that?

And then, when discussing Ratzinger, you seem to imply maybe it will be even a bigger role if he sees these "islands of light," like Opus Dei, as playing a major role. As sort of a follow-on question, does "islands of light" mean that Ratzinger would be happier in a way with a smaller Church but with a more committed following?

**JOHN ALLEN:** I like these very narrowly focused questions that you can just toss off in two words. First of all, John Paul II and Opus Dei. I think it is obvious that John Paul felt a very deep personal affinity for both Josemaria Escrivá and Opus Dei. If you want to know why, I think it had precious little to do with Opus Dei's resources or perceptions of its power and so forth. I think it had to do with this: coming out of the experience of Solidarity in Poland, John Paul II was fascinated with the spirituality of work. He lived in this context in which the kind of Marxist understanding of work in the modern age—that is, as a kind of alienating phenomenon imposed upon people by a capitalist ruling class—was what was taught in universities and so on. He wanted to, I think, recover a much more profound and positive Christian understanding of the value and dignity of work.

He found in Escrivá a kindred spirit. Now, the two men actually never met, but he certainly read Escrivá's work and very much admired Escrivá's understanding of work, and obviously therefore this people that he had founded to carry forward that understanding of work. I think that admiration can be glimpsed, among other ways, from the fact that, prior to the first Conclave of 1978, which was the Conclave that elected [John Paul I \(the Pope of Thirty-Three days\)](#), Cardinal Wojtyła—that is Karl Wojtyła, the future John Paul II—his last stop before he headed into the Conclave was to pray at Escrivá's tomb at the Roman headquarters of Opus Dei, called Villa Tevere.

Therefore, I think it is no surprise that John Paul II embraced Opus Dei in virtually every way possible. I mean if you look at the record, in 1982 John Paul II made Opus Dei a personal prelature, giving it this unique canonical status; in 1992 he beatified Escrivá; and in 2002 he canonized Escrivá. So every ten years there was a major expression, a kind of papal embrace, papal affection, for Opus Dei.

Again, I think that it flowed out of primarily this idea that Opus Dei and Escrivá had a key that unlocked one of the core modern problems. By the way, this is one of those reasons, that, aside from the fact that there was a complete absence of evidence to support the theory, I have never bought the idea that Opus Dei somehow paid for the beatification and canonization of Escrivá, because it didn't have to. I mean the truth is that John Paul came into office wanting to do those things. There was no need to twist his arm or wrestle him to the mat. Quite the contrary, I think he would have liked to have done it in some ways even more rapidly than it happened. In that sense, there was clearly a kind of rapport there.

I think with Benedict XVI, the truth is, although he certainly supports and admires Opus Dei, he does not have the same personal affinity with Opus Dei that John Paul II did. If you're looking for a movement in the Catholic universe that Benedict XVI has a close personal connection to, it's not Opus Dei; it's [Communion and Liberation](#), a movement founded in Italian Catholicism in the early 1950s by a priest by the name of [Father Luigi Giussani](#).

Benedict has said on several occasions that Father Giussani changed his life. He arranged to be the principal celebrant at Giussani's funeral mass in 2004. He has a community of women who are taking care of the domestic running of his papal household who belong to a form of consecrated life call [Memores Domini](#), which is related to the Communion and Liberation movement. So I don't think there is the same pipeline, if you like, between this Pope and Opus Dei specifically.

But my point about Ratzinger and the movements was simply that I think Benedict's imagination, his vision, of a politically engaged Catholicism on his watch is not so much that we're going to be able to work through mass movements, relying on Christian culture to inoculate ourselves against whatever the

threats out there are, particularly this dictatorship of relativism. I think his vision is that the political application of Catholic moral teaching and Catholic doctrine is going to come through small, mobilized, highly motivated groups who will have an outsized impact because of their passion.

Now, you ask: Is Ratzinger going to be content with a smaller Church? No, I don't think "content" is the right way to describe it. I think every pope is an evangelist—that is, every pope wants to spread the Christian message as much as possible—but I think, in addition to being an evangelist, Benedict is a realist, and he believes that, given the kind of climate of opinion and secular modernity, the possibilities for rapid, immediate, numeric expansion of Catholicism are relatively limited; therefore, you can't count on Catholicism as a mass phenomenon to have the kind of incisive role in public affairs you want to have.

If you want to know the difference between John Paul II and Benedict on this point, there is a book-length interview with Ratzinger, published in 1997, called [\*Salt of the Earth\*](#), with a German journalist by the name of Peter Seewald, who writes for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in Munich. Seewald asked Ratzinger this question, "Could you describe to us John Paul's vision for the third millennium as a new springtime for the Catholic Church?"

Ratzinger gives this lovely, page-and-a-half-long answer about how the Pope thinks in millennia. So the first millennium was the millennium of Christian unity, the second millennium was the millennium of Christian division, and the third millennium will be a millennium of reunification and it will usher in a new era of evangelization, where Asia and so forth are open to the Church, and on and on and on, brilliantly sketching this very optimistic and hopeful vision that John Paul had.

Then, at the end, there is this wonderful sentence where Ratzinger takes a breath and says, "Myself, I don't see it."

**QUESTION:** I thank you so much for this informative talk, and in particular the anecdotes that you tell.

When you were describing the formation of the Opus Dei in its earlier days, you said it was meant to serve the Church as lay people, as a secular influence on the Church; and then you later went on to say that it now serves the Church as the Church wishes to be served. So I'm wondering, in addition to the shift away from the United States to other parts of the world, wherein lies the role? Is it a proactive advisory group? Is it a hierarchical responding group? That is, how do you describe the difference between its being secular in formation and at the same time playing a role for the Church? Could you elaborate on that?

**JOHN ALLEN:** Yes. You know, when Escrivá, founded Opus Dei in 1928, it was an exclusively lay phenomenon. It wasn't until 1943 that he even added priests. The reason he did so actually was because there are certain things that only priests can do; I mean saying the mass, hearing confessions, and so on. In the end, Opus Dei had a need for priests to perform those functions.

But in its essence and in its origins, it was conceived of as an outwardly-focused lay movement. In other words, it shouldn't be concerned with inside-Church baseball— you know, that's for somebody else to do. The idea was this was supposed to be lay people bringing a Christian perspective to law and architecture and so on.

The point is that today Opus Dei certainly does have a certain influence in internal Church affairs. In the book I run through the numbers. In the Vatican, for example, in the Roman Curia, which is the papal bureaucracy, there are about 2,500 people who work there; twenty of them are members of Opus Dei. As one of the questioners pointed out, one of them is the Vatican spokesperson, Joaquin Navarro-Valls. There are three Opus Dei members, including Navarro, who head offices in the Vatican, although only one of them is policymaking. So, in that sense, there is a certain advisory role they play on internal Church matters.

To take another example, the number two official in Opus Dei at the moment, Monsignor Fernando Oc?riz, is a consultant for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. That's the office that Cardinal Ratzinger held before he became Pope, and it's sort of the doctrinal watchdog agency of the Vatican. In that

capacity, Monsignor Oc?riz was one of the principal authors of a very controversial Vatican document in 2001, called *Dominus Jesus*, which was a document about the theological evaluation of religious diversity. The document says that, objectively speaking, non-Catholics are in a gravely deficient position with respect to Catholics—in other words, reasserting that Christ is the lone savior and that the fullest revelation is in the Christian Gospel.

So there are roles that Opus Dei members play in internal Church affairs, and I don't want to minimize the influence that some of those members may have. But I would say that, both officially speaking and I also think in reality, the primary purpose Opus Dei is supposed to play is not being a kind of player in internal Church politics; it is supposed to be being out in the professions, being out in the highways and byways of the modern world, and transforming that secular world from within.

If you want a classic illustration of what this idea of the sanctification of work means, I'll tell you this story. When I was out doing interviews for the book—and, of course, I did 300 hours—when I would ask Opus Dei members to explain what they meant by the sanctification of work, I would often get answers that were kind of couched in a lot of theological verbiage that were kind of tough to penetrate. But my favorite answer was this. When I was in Lima, Peru, I interviewed a guy who was the son of Japanese immigrants in Lima. This guy runs a laundry in a poor neighborhood, called Rimac. It's sort of like the Bronx.

I asked him, "So what does sanctification of work mean to you?" He said, "Well, let me put it to you this way. I was working for my dad in this laundry before I joined Opus Dei. At that period of my life, when I would get a shirt in that had maybe a few tiny stains under the collar, I would just let it go, because I figured they're probably not going to notice, and if anybody complains about it, I'll just say I didn't see it. But now that I'm in Opus Dei, I try my hardest to get those stains out because I understand that I'm not doing this work just for my client, I'm doing this work for God, and from the point of view of eternity, it is just as important."

This is, I think, a wonderful illustration of how they understand this ethos. Also, by the way, it's a great recommendation for Opus Dei laundries. I keep trying to convince them to open one in Rome, but so far no luck.

**QUESTION:** I was assigned to the American Embassy in Rome in the late 1960s for three years and then followed Italian events quite closely from Washington in the early 1980s. As you know, if you spend any time in Europe, particularly France and Italy, you're subject to all sorts of conspiratorial theories. As I recall conversations I had with various Italians over the years, there was always this theme that Opus Dei people were trying very hard to recruit people who were powerful and influential, trying to maximize the power of the Church. And then you had the scandal of the [Propaganda Due](#) [also known as P2 or P-Due], the propaganda tool.

You didn't really say much about this drive, if it in fact is true, to try to increase their power, to increase the power of the Church. I wonder if you could just speak to that point. And then, if there was in fact any tie-in with the P-Due and [Calvi](#) and all those people, who were hunted down and arrested.

**JOHN ALLEN:** Well, to come to that last point first, you may know that there was actually a parliamentary investigation of Opus Dei in the mid-1980s, which culminated in 1986. In essence, this investigation found that Opus Dei was not, by conventional standards of the term, a secret society. As Senator Scalfaro, who conducted the investigation, pointed out, it's hard to call anything a secret society that you can look up in the phone book. In that sense, I think it debunked the idea that there was a relevant analogy between Opus Dei and the P-Due.

To come to your point about trying to expand influence, I don't think there is a corporate agenda in Opus Dei to either take over the Church or expand its influence in secular politics. On the other hand, I would say, the nature of Opus Dei being what it is—I mean the strong emphasis on meeting both the highest standards of secular excellence and then also going the very last mile to serve the Church in any way possible—undoubtedly, they have a disproportionate influence on things beyond their size.



Again, bear in mind, folks, we're talking about 85,000 people around the world. This is not a massive organization. It's the same membership, by the way, as the Diocese of Hobart on the island of Tasmania off the coast of Australia. But I think you will find a disproportionate number within those 85,000 of people who play prominent positions either inside the Church or outside.

I don't think there is a corporate agenda to expand that influence. I just think it's the inherent dynamic of the kind of spirituality that Opus Dei fosters.

Now, in terms of the recruiting thing, this is another one of the great myths about Opus Dei, that it is constantly trawling for new members. Although Opus Dei will insist until they're blue in the face—and please forgive me, Brian, who is one of the corporate spokespersons for Opus Dei, since I'm sure if you asked him, he would insist Opus Dei does not recruit—thank you, but it's not true. Opus Dei, like any other organization, obviously would be delighted to find new people who want to share its life. I find nothing particularly scandalous about that.

However, this notion that this is a vast recruiting machinery that is constantly sucking people into its orbit is simply, I think, debunked by the numbers. Again, the group was founded in 1928. The today number is 85,000 people around the world. Whatever else you want to say about it, it does not appear to be a particularly effective recruiting machine. They add about 650 members a year.

As I point out in the book, there is this impression, which is based on a talk that Escrivá once gave, that every Opus Dei numerary is supposed to be adding five new members a year. That is, they were supposed to have five people in their sphere of influence who were on the brink of joining Opus Dei. I ran the numbers. If that had happened, between 2000 and 2005 Opus Dei would have added about 340,000 new members. Folks, they fell 327,000 people short of their quota. I mean if that's your sales force, I would say they would all be out looking for work, if this were corporate America.

I believe that Opus Dei is recruiting, but I don't think in a nefarious sense; I think in a fairly benign sense. I think Opus Dei has also learned from bitter experience that the last thing they want are new embittered ex-members who are going to go off and write "kiss and tell" books. They are not interested in generating new resentment. And so I think there is maturity and discernment about it.

Certainly they are looking for people, but there is absolutely no evidence, in my opinion, that, whatever their sales pitch is, that it is so strong as to be irresistible. Quite the contrary, I think the vast majority of people who in one way or another are approached or teased about the idea of becoming Opus Dei members in the end don't do it.

Let me add, finally, on a personal note, that there is this image that Opus Dei is constantly going after the elites. I mean they want the best, the brightest, and so forth. It is a source of some frustration to me that in the course of traveling to nine countries and 300 hours of interviews, not once did anyone ask me about joining Opus Dei, which leads me to ask, "What is wrong with me?" Perhaps that's something Brian could address at a later date.

Thank you very much.

**JOANNE MYERS:** After this morning's discussion, I would say nothing is wrong with your discussion of Opus Dei, and I thank you for taking us into the Catholic Church.

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