

Information Office Opus Dei Prelature

Opus Dei, Saint Josemaría Escrivá, Franco and his Regime

Opus Dei, by its very nature, does not take any interest whatsoever in political affairs. The activities of the Prelature are restricted to the spiritual formation of its members and others. Whenever a political position is attributed to Opus Dei, it is always the fruit of some misunderstanding. Saint Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei, in an interview released by *Le Figaro* on May 16, 1966, while answering a question on the involvement of Opus Dei in Spanish public life in those years, insisted on this idea (*Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, Little Hills & Scepter, Sydney, 1993):

[E]ach of the members of Opus Dei carries on his work with full freedom and with personal responsibility. They compromise neither the Church nor the Work, for they are supported neither by the Church nor by the Work in their personal activities. People who have a military concept of apostolate and spiritual life will always tend to see the free and personal work of Christians as a collective activity. But I assure you, as I have said time and time again since 1928, that variety in thought and action in what is temporal and in what is a matter of theological opinion poses no problem for the Work. On the contrary, the diversity which exists and will always exist among the members of Opus Dei is a sign of good spirit, of an honest life, of respect for the legitimate opinion of each individual.

The Vatican journalist Andrea Tornielli, in his work *Escrivá fondatore dell'Opus Dei* (Piemme, 2002; our translation here) addresses this point. The book presents information gathered in the examination of witnesses and the proceedings of the canonization process of Saint Josemaría. The journalist touches on the notion of freedom that permeates the spirit of Opus Dei:

As a result of this spirit of freedom and of its eminently apostolic end, Opus Dei recognizes a plurality of options in the temporal sphere. “A pluralism – as written in the *Positio* (document of the process of canonization) – that springs from the wide variety of social positions of its members and that makes it impossible for Opus Dei to carry out any group action whatsoever in any field, be it professional, economic, social, political, etc, which would imply embracing specific partial interests”. (...) These quotations are necessary to contextualize the misunderstandings concerning Opus Dei in the 50s and 60s, with regard to some events in Spanish politics”.

In his book *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church* (Doubleday, 2007), John Allen addresses the issue of the relations between Opus Dei and the Franco regime, analyzing the misinterpreted facts underlying the prejudice that attributes a pro-Franco tendency to Opus Dei:

The presumption of a pro-Franco stance on the part of Escrivá and Opus Dei is usually anchored in the fact that in 1957, three members of Opus Dei became ministers in Franco's government. Alberto Ullastres Calvo, a professor of economic history at the University of Madrid, became Minister of Trade; Laureano López Rodó, a scientist, became Technological Secretary of the State Department (later he became Minister without Portfolio and Commissioner for the Economic Development Plan); and Mariano Navarro Rubio, managing

director of Banco Popular, took over the Treasury Department. In 1962, another member of Opus Dei, Gregorio López Bravo Castro, became Minister of Industry. In *Spain: Dictatorship to Democracy*, Raymond Carr and Juan Pablo Fusi described these Opus Dei ministers as “proponents of rapid – capitalist – growth and of the ‘neutralization’ of politics through prosperity.”

Taking this into consideration, Allen remarks that at the time many Catholics belonging to various organizations occupied government positions:

Opus Dei was not the only Catholic organization in Spain which had members who served the Franco regime. The president of Catholic Action in Spain, Alberto Martín Artajo, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in July 1945, and before accepting the post, he received the official blessing of the Spanish bishops. Out of 116 ministers appointed by Franco in 11 governments between 1939 and 1975, eight were members of Opus Dei. One of the eight died three months after being appointed, and four others held office only during one government. The Opus Dei ministers were considered part of the “technocratic” wing of the Franco regime, and some historians credit them with ushering in economic reforms that brought the Spanish economy into the modern world.

Furthermore, Allen notes that there were also several members of Opus Dei in that same period among the ranks of opponents of Franco’s regime. This is clear evidence of the reality of political freedom within Opus Dei:

There were also numerous members of Opus Dei active in the anti-Franco opposition. Rafael Calvo Serer, a numerary of Opus Dei, was a liberal monarchist and influential literary figure. In 1953, he was expelled from the *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas*, or Superior Council for Scientific Research, for having published an essay in Paris critical of the Franco government. From 1966 he was publisher of the newspaper *Madrid*, until it was closed down under government censorship five years later. Facing a series of judicial processes from Franco’s courts, he went into exile in Paris. Upon his return he joined forces with the secretary of the Spanish Community Party to found the *Junta Democrática*, designed to prepare the way for a democratic transition after Franco. Antonio Fontán, another member of Opus Dei, was a collaborator with Calvo Serer on *Madrid*. The offices of the newspaper were eventually blown up by pro-Franco forces. Manuel Fernández Areal, a numerary of Opus Dei, was jailed under Franco for critical pieces he published in the *Diario Regional de Valladolid*.

Fr. Pere Pascual, a priest of Opus Dei, was a lay numerary when he founded a clandestine union for journalists in the 1960s who were trying to push the Franco regime towards reform. Pascual was involved in one of the first serious protests against Franco’s regime in Barcelona, which is recalled as the *caputxinada*. It took place in a friary of the Capuchin fathers in Sarrià, a neighborhood of Barcelona, between March 9-11, 1966. It began with a clandestine meeting of a new students’ union, set up to rival the official students’ association linked to the Falange. The union brought together people from a variety of political views, including the center-left and the clandestine Communist party. One hour into the meeting on March 9, Franco’s police arrived and demanded that everyone leave the friary and produce their documents. About 200 of those taking part decided to remain, carrying on with their lectures, roundtables, and debates. For more than 48 hours, they were guests of the Capuchins. When the meeting finally broke up, Pascual, who was among the organizers, was charged in a Spanish court and barred from publishing. In addition to Pascual, two other lay members of Opus Dei took part in the *caputxinada*, Robert Espí and Francesco Brosa. The event had a strong symbolic value across Spain, in part because it embodied a non-violent, cultural form of protest.

As a footnote to the above, the only cardinal, archbishop or bishop in Spain ever jailed under Franco was Herranz, who at the time was a young Opus Dei numerary and university student. He had taken part in a small-scale act of civil disobedience which involved painting the slogan, “We want an agrarian revolution in Andalucia,” on a wall in Madrid. (Herranz’s father had been a doctor in Andalucia, and Herranz said he was sensitive to issues of land reform and agrarian justice). Franco’s police arrested the youth, thinking they were Communists. They were held overnight in prison, but released after a search of Herranz’s pockets turned up a rosary. That, according to police logic, was proof positive he wasn’t a Communist. Of the episode, Herranz said: “I liked this [protest], especially before a society that was a little too flat, a little too much to the right.”

Allen also describes Saint Josemaría Escrivá’s attitude with regards to the events at the time:

All of this activity was happening with the knowledge of Escrivá, who, according to the principals involved, never intervened, either with members who served in the Franco government, or with members who protested against it. Throughout his life, Escrivá insisted that members of Opus Dei are free to do as they please in secular politics, as long as they uphold the teachings of the Catholic Church, and that no one in Opus Dei would attempt to influence a member’s secular political preferences (...). The overall impression one gets is that Escrivá strove to maintain neutrality with respect to the Franco regime, even if privately he felt some sympathy for a leader trying by his lights to be an upright Christian. A charge of being “pro-Franco” cannot be sustained, except in the generic sense that most Spanish Catholics were initially supportive of Franco; for one thing, as we have seen above, there was widespread participation by Opus Dei members in anti-Franco activity, arguably more consequential than the participation of a handful of Opus Dei technocrats in Franco’s governments. The most one can say is that Escrivá was not “anti-Franco” either. His main concern seemed to be the stability of Spanish society, in order to hold radical movements at bay that might renew the horrors of the Civil War. Escrivá did not attempt to dictate particular political solutions, either to his members or to the Spanish authorities.

For further evidence, we can also turn to the testimony of Bl. Álvaro del Portillo, the founder’s closest collaborator and successor at the head of Opus Dei from 1975 until 1994. In an interview on Saint Josemaría (*Immersed in God*, Scepter 1996), he describes the climate at the time as follows:

In the case of Francoism, it is necessary to recall that the end of the Spanish Civil War signaled the rebirth of the life of the Church, of religious associations, of Catholic schools... The hierarchy, understandably, did come out in favor of General Franco, whose rise to power was considered by many to be providential. It is enough to remember how at the end of the civil war, the façades of cathedrals and parish churches all over Spain were plastered with the symbols of the Falange and the following inscription: “All those who died for God and Spain – forget them not!” [Cáidos por Dios y por España. ¡Presentes!]. The founder of Opus Dei protested against this abuse many times.

In those circumstances, although the Father [Saint Josemaría] acknowledged Franco’s achievements in bringing peace to the country, he had to counteract two dangers: on the one hand, a manipulation of the Catholic faith, and attempt on the part of certain groups to monopolize the representation of Catholics in public life; and, on the other hand, a tendency in some Catholic circles to use public power as a kind of secular arm; in short, two versions of clericalism. (...)

When, in the fifties, some members of the Work became ministers in Franco's government, the Father neither approved nor disapproved; they were exercising their freedom as Catholic citizens, and showing respect to the hierarchy. However, there were people who tried to attribute the use of political pressure or interference to the Work as such. We experienced no end of difficulties and misunderstandings on this account.

The founder was so concerned about the freedom of members of the Work in temporal matters, that he defended Opus Dei from attacks coming from institutions of the regime. This can be seen in the following letter, written by the founder of Opus Dei on October 28, 1966, to minister José Solís, head of the Falange (reproduced in Vázquez de Prada *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, Scepter 2005):

Dear Friend: Word has reached me here about the campaign that the press of the Falange, which operates under Your Excellency's authority, has been so unjustly waging against Opus Dei. Once again I repeat that the members of Opus Dei—each and every one of them—are personally completely free, as free as if they did not belong to Opus Dei, in all temporal matters and in the theological ones that the Church leaves us free to disagree about. It therefore makes no sense to bring up in discussions of questions political, professional, social, etc., the fact that a particular person belongs to the Work—just as it would not make sense for anyone, when speaking of your own political activities, to bring in your wife and children, your family.

The publications connected with your ministry are operating in that misguided way, and all that they are thereby accomplishing is to offend God by confusing the spiritual and temporal orders, since it is obvious that the directors of Opus Dei can do nothing to curb the legitimate and complete personal freedom of its members (who, for their part, never hide the fact that each assumes full responsibility for his or her own actions). The plurality of opinions among the members of the Work is and always will be just one more manifestation of their freedom and one more proof of their good spirit, which leads them to respect the opinions of others.

When attacking or defending the ideas or public action of a fellow citizen, have the decency, which justice demands, to not make reference to Opus Dei, from any point of view. This *spiritual family* does not involve itself, nor can it ever involve itself, in political or earthly questions of any kind, because its aims are *exclusively* spiritual.

I hope that you will have understood my surprise, both at the announcement of that defamatory campaign and at seeing it carried out. I'm sure that by now you must be aware of the gross mistake being made, and of the responsibility in conscience which all those involved in this campaign are assuming before God's tribunal. For it is a great mistake to denigrate an institution which does not—and cannot—influence the use that its members, spread over five continents, make of their personal freedom as citizens, while never evading their personal responsibility for their actions.

I beg you to put an end to this campaign against Opus Dei, since Opus Dei has done nothing to deserve it. Otherwise, I will have to conclude that you have not understood me—in which case it will be clear that Your Excellency is not capable either of understanding or of respecting freedom, qua *libertate Christus nos liberavit* [the freedom for which Christ set us free (see Gal 1:5)], the freedom of Christian citizens.

Fight when you must (though I am not fond of fights). But do not commit the injustice of dragging into those battles what is above any human passion.

I do want to take this opportunity to convey to you my best wishes and to send my blessing for you and yours. In Domino.

Finally, there is another aspect—by no means secondary—that should be taken into account: Opus Dei is and always has been, from the very beginning, an institution with a universal character. Its affairs in Spain before, during, and after the Franco period are merely local, and not universal, in scope. Vittorio Messori highlighted this point in his book *Opus Dei, an investigation* (Four Courts Press, 1997):

The relationships between some members of Opus Dei and Francoism are considered by Opus Dei “as particular Spanish case.” It is not something central, as is sometimes made out by the critics of the organization. In fact, further confirmation that the vision was supposed to be extended to the whole world, and not limited to a single country and on definite time, can be found in Don Escrivá’s immediate plan to move to Rome. He was impeded, of course, first by the Civil War, then by the Second World War.

By 1946, when both wars were over, he took an old steamer from Barcelona to Genoa and soon after reached the city where he would permanently reside, establishing there the seat of a Work that was going to be universal, and which could therefore realize its worldwide mission in this Catholic city. He wanted Opus Dei to be Roman and Marian.

Today, the great majority of members are non-Spanish.

Messori reproduces the founder’s own words in an interview with an American newspaper in the 1960s:

Today, however, Spain is only one of sixty-five countries where there are persons in Opus Dei. If geographical situation has helped it there, from the beginning it had a universal scope.

And Messori concludes:

Thus we must look at the “caso Franco”, but with an awareness that it is not an objectively central fact but a marginal one. Certainly the matter was bound to a precise time and place and is now definitively past.

Compiled by Jack Valero
press.uk@opusdei.org

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