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Characters in a Divine Story

Based on the surprising story of Irene Kalpas, Pablo Pérez, Professor of Contemporary History at the University of Navarra, explains how the story of Opus Dei can be told through each of the people who have found their way to God in this institution of the Catholic Church.

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When talking about history, I like to remember something that those of us

who are engaged in this enjoyable task always have to bear in mind. First, that historical narrative is always a matter of perspective. And secondly, something that perhaps not all historians agree on, but which is a conviction that is increasingly ingrained in me is that we know history better when we know its protagonists.

History, in fact, in my opinion, is the memory of how freedom was used by those who preceded us in time. And the better we know how they chose to do it and what they chose to do, the better we know what that history is.

When it comes to knowing the history of Opus Dei, these two elements, put together, give rise to something that I think is interesting and we are going to do a little exercise today as an introduction to the history of Opus Dei.

The first interesting consideration, or one that I find interesting even anyway, even for those people who do not have faith is this: how one protagonist sees the story is very different from another. Let's take for example - a very simple case - the story of a chair. If we ask the chair (if the chair could have knowledge) for its history, its answer would be that it is there, that it appeared on a certain date, that it provides this service, that it has this structure, and perhaps it would even tell us what its composition is and, if it is a designer chair, its design.

On the other hand, if we were to ask the person who made the chair, he would tell us about the type of wood he decided to use, how he thought what the chair would be like, what difficulties he encountered, how he decided to make it, what the final design was, how he executed it and how he finished it. If we want to look

at it even more broadly and want to tell the story of the chair, we will have to tell the story of the ground on which the tree grew, where one day a woodcutter drove his axe or chainsaw into it to make the wood from which a chair was to be made.

What is so interesting about this little historical parable? What is interesting about it is that the point of view of the man who decides to make a chair is very different from the point of view of the one who thinks the story is about the objective that the man who decides to make a chair is going to achieve, than the one who simply is a chair. In a way, it has been made for someone. By someone else. This is of great importance for believers, and in general for anyone who ponders what the meaning of history is, because God knows it as a whole. God is that infinite mind that knows everything perfectly in a single

instant, in an instant that is always present for Him and that is continually renewed. We, on the other hand, know things in time, how they are made. Like the craftsman who made the chair or the chair itself. When the chair is already made, we know how we came to be here. Our parents have a part of the history of how we came into the world, because they know a little of the precedent.

Well, the history of something like Opus Dei has, from God's point of view, an interest for the people who form part of Opus Dei. It has been promoted in order that these people may join it and find a way to show the way to God, precisely in the midst of the most ordinary tasks. That, in a nutshell, is what Opus Dei is.

Getting to know the people of Opus Dei in order to know the history of Opus Dei well

In order to know Opus Dei and its history well, I think that the key is to know as many people in Opus Dei as possible, and the more people who have died, the better. What's more, the deceased people have an added interest over those who are still alive. This is because, in the case of the deceased, the meaning of their life is much more perceptible since the meaning of a man's life is only grasped at the end. Those of us who have experience, experience, for example, of the death of our parents, know that at that moment our life is illuminated in a new way, painfully, but it is illuminated in a completely new way.

This reality, that we find meaning when we end, led me to become interested in a section of the Official Bulletin of the Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, which is called Romana, which is published in Rome and is published in various

languages, which is available online in almost all its sections, except for one that was available before and is no longer available and which is the one that interests me most. The section is called *In Pace*, "In Peace." It is a compilation of the faithful of Opus Dei who have died in the six-month period prior to the publication - because the publication is half-yearly - to which the data collected in that particular issue of the magazine refer.

So when I was once asked to talk about the history of Opus Dei, one of the exercises I thought would be useful for the people who would listen to me was to read a few biographies of Opus Dei members in the *In Pace* section of *Romana*. Well, I set about it and a biography that I had read recently came to mind immediately and had struck me for a reason that I will explain in detail in a little while. I had read the

following biography in the January-June 2012 issue of *Romana*, on page 176 to be precise: Irene Kalpas was born in Warsaw on 13 August 1915. At the age of 24, during the Second World War she became the widow of a Polish army officer, killed in Katyn. In 1944 her entire family was dispersed to concentration camps. Irene was in Ravensbrück until the end of the war. She worked in a state office in Warsaw. She got to know Opus Dei on 26 June 2002. She was captivated by the spirit of the Work and the figure of St. Josemaría. She became a member of the Prelature in 2003, when she was 88 years old, and from then on she gave an apostolic dimension to her whole life. She interacted with a large number of people, especially young people who came to her for advice. She was faithful to this apostolate until the last moments of her life, with a self-sacrificing dedication that went beyond her state of health or

difficulties due to fatigue, pain and the limitations of age. She prayed to God to be able to persevere to the end. She died in Warsaw on 23 March 2012.

Irene Kalpas

Well, when I read this biography it so happened that I had recently seen the film *Katyn*, about the events in the Katyn forest near Smolensk, in the territory that was then the Soviet Union, and I had used it to teach my history students in a communications faculty about what had happened in Poland and how complex those events had been and the suffering they had caused for so many people. Well, I found that a widow of Katyn was one of the protagonists of the history of Opus Dei.

Well, this woman seemed to me a striking example of how Opus Dei, a thing born- an institution born in

Spain in 1928, inspired by a Spanish priest, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, at that time in Madrid, came into the life of a widow from Katyn who was alive at that time. She was already alive in 1928. And it transformed her, transformed the last years of her life. Opus Dei was made for her and she found her way in Opus Dei in her old age, and she asked God for perseverance, to be able to persevere to the end. Which shows the importance of that gift, whatever years we have left.

What a surprise it was when I spoke to some young people who asked me... They asked me to do the same thing I'm doing now, to talk about the history of Opus Dei. I gave them this example and, at the end of the talk after talking about other considerations, one of them came up to me and said: "Look, I know that woman." He was Polish. Big surprise.

And then he told me her story, which I will tell you briefly.

The question occurred as follows: Why such a curious date, why did she meet Opus Dei on such a specific date, 26 June 2002? And it is also interesting to note that it is on a date that has a special significance for the people of Opus Dei, because it is the date of the death of its founder, Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer.

Well, there is a story to this. This woman had lived in that house with her family, her aunt and uncle, in Warsaw, before the war, where she had experienced the most cherished moments of her entire life. She had even celebrated her wedding there. There she had experienced all the emotions of her youth and there she had had to mourn the loss of her husband. The events of Katyn are terrible events. If you do not know about them, I recommend that you

go through them, perhaps in a history book. They were hidden for many years because the graves were discovered when the Germans had occupied the Soviet zone in the attack against the USSR, and when those large mass graves appeared, containing more than 20,000 corpses (it is estimated that the Soviets shot the back of the head of some 23,000 people, priests, intellectuals and above all army officers, between 13,000 and 16,000 army officers).

Well, when the Germans discovered them, the Soviets said that it was actually the Germans who had killed them and that it was a fascist lie, which meant that it was the fault of the communists, the Russians, who at the time were enduring their oppression. As the Nazis were not very trustworthy either, people were perplexed by the facts; in order not to antagonise Stalin, the Allies, in particular the British, let it pass, and

to the infamy of being murderers, they added the lie that their own murderers had erected a monument to them. Well, Irene Kalpas had lived through this suffering, and she had lived through suffering, and her house had been practically destroyed in the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, which we do not have time to recount in detail here either.

And she had not been able to inherit the house that was hers because of legal difficulties. She was too sad to see it again that she generally avoided it when she walked around Warsaw, even when she was a state official returning from the concentration camps in communist Poland. But she went to the optician quite often, but as she grew older, and her optician moved, it so happened that the optician's new house was on the same street where she had lived with her uncles and

aunts, on Filtrova Street, under Filtrova Street number 27.

She never went near the house, she took the tram and left. She didn't even want to see it because of all the feelings and emotions that arose whenever she saw it. Until one day, without being able to explain how — when she was interviewed about it she said that for her it was a miracle — without knowing how it happened, she decided not to take the tram, to walk a little further along the street, to go towards Filtrova 27. And when she got there, to look if there were roses in the garden and, surprisingly for her, to open the door, the garden gate, to go in and start climbing the stairs, without knowing who lived there. And finally to ring the doorbell. A nice young man opened the door and asked her if she was looking for anything or if he could help her with anything. And she said, "I wanted to

know if the garden still has roses growing in it." "—Well, if you'd like to come in," he said. She was a little perplexed as to what she had done by entering someone else's house without saying anything, and she saw that the house was very much changed. As I said, the house had been destroyed during the uprising of 1944.

But at that moment she asked about the room that held the greatest concentration of her memories, the dining room. She had seen that there was a library, that there was a portrait of John Paul II on a table, that gave her confidence, and when the boy explained to her, and that there was the dining room, she answered: "Yes, I have lived here. There was the dining room." "—Would you like to come in?" said the man who had welcomed her. She opened the door and found that there was a small chapel, an oratory.

The one who invited her in, seeing her emotion, let her pray for a few moments, and after a while she got up and said, "Could you explain to me what this is?" She was completely perplexed. In the place where the greatest emotions were concentrated, the memories of her aunt, her uncles, her family, she had found that Jesus Christ in the Eucharist was living, to her great surprise. What was this? This man explained that it was an Opus Dei centre. In Opus Dei centres, at least in some of them, there is an oratory where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, with the permission of the Church. This surprise led her to ask more questions, to get to know the Work, to understand that this path was for her, that this light of God on sanctification in daily life was for her. And as she says in a very nice video that is on the Opus Dei website — you can still see it and I hope you can see it for a long time — she encourages older people by

telling them that it is always time and that it is worth following God's voice and following it faithfully, because that is what leads to happiness.

Well, this is the little story of Irene Kalpas, with many more things that could be told, and that is Opus Dei, in short: the life of each of the people who are part of it, because God somehow shows them that this is what he expects of them in this world.

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