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Opus Dei myths far removed from reality

On June 26, Masses were held around the country to celebrate the founder of Opus Dei

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In 2010 I was invited to take part in an eight-day course called The Church Up Close. It was held in Rome in a stunning building occupied by Opus Dei called Santa Croce. It was located off the equally stunning Piazza Navona.

The priests of Opus Dei taught it on behalf of the Vatican. It was made clear to us that this was not a course about Opus Dei. In fact, Fr. John Wauck, the course director, was even reluctant to talk about Opus Dei lest it appeared he was using the course to promote his own group.

It was eight days of lectures and field trips interspersed with Masses and amazing lunches, with ample amounts of wine, that seemed to go on and on.

A friend of mine used to say, “If it’s not Italian it’s not food.” He was right.

The course was meant to teach journalists the inner workings of the Catholic Church. It was not indoctrination, but intended to help those covering religion to avoid foolish mistakes and to know where to look or who to ask when questions arose.

On the last day we took a bus trip outside the city to where St. Benedict first set up a monastery at Subiaco. On the way back we coaxed Fr. John to talk about Opus Dei, which means Work of God and known familiarly as The Work. One thing he said caught my attention: Opus Dei priests were considered the spiritual directors of choice in Rome.

Later I asked him whether he thought I could benefit from spiritual direction. For some reason I thought of it as self-indulgent, a kind of Catholic therapy for those with too much time on their hands. I could not have been more wrong.

He encouraged me to seek out an Opus Dei priest when I returned to Toronto.

Before heading to Rome I had done a few stories for the National Post about what I saw was the unfair treatment of Opus Dei in general and

the treatment of the group's Vicar of Canada, Msgr. Fred Dolan.

Dolan became controversial when he went to Parliament to talk to a few MPs about spiritual issues in 2008. The reaction to his visit was nothing short of hysterical. Another story involved the reaction to a Quebec candidate for Parliament who turned out was also a member of Opus Dei.

When I decided to write about him, my understanding was that Opus Dei was highly secretive and he would likely dodge any media calls.

I found him in the Montreal directory and within two minutes I had him on the phone.

“Ask me anything you want,” Dolan said.

So much for a secret society of albino assassins, as Opus Dei was portrayed

in Dan Brown's 2003 mystery novel The Da Vinci Code.

Dolan and I have since become good friends. Meeting him made me realize that some of the worst intolerance towards Opus Dei did not come from the general public but from the Catholic world itself. Which is a terrible shame when we as the Body of Christ are subject to so much ridicule and misunderstanding from people who do not even try to know us.

Once back from Rome I made an appointment to meet with Fr. Cris Graas. When we met he was wearing a black cassock. He was also tall and thin and balding and at first glance he looked stern and austere.

Looks can be deceiving. He is a very serious man when it comes to faith. He is also direct, a quality I appreciate. In time I discovered a deeply compassionate person with a

sly sense of humour. I also made a good friend.

I cannot do justice to what he transmitted to me over the past eight years. My faith has grown tremendously even through some awful physical struggles. When I was confined to my bed in excruciating pain he would show up to give me the Eucharist and talk about the Catholic response to suffering. And sometimes just to keep me company.

What he taught me is that we can sanctify every moment through the ordinary things in our lives. Seems simple but it is profound.

Throughout all of this I also began to know Opus Dei members. I attended their day-long retreats from time to time and also spent a glorious three full days at a silent retreat at their centre north of Toronto. For those who know me the idea of me being silent for that long seems a miracle.

I also found that not everyone who attends the retreats is a member of Opus Dei. Some are friends of The Work as am I.

I have also attended many of their Masses and have come away each time more in tune with my faith.

On or just prior to June 26, Masses were held around the country to celebrate St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei. Cardinal Thomas Collins is celebrating one of those Masses at Toronto's Blessed Trinity Church.

Reflecting back, I am not sure what Brown was on about, but he clearly never met a real person from Opus Dei. And I have yet to meet any lurking albino assassins.

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