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The Minerva Publishing House

The Minerva publishing firm (1943-1946) was the first cultural initiative begun by faithful of Opus Dei. It was launched with great enthusiasm, under the direct encouragement of Saint Josemaría. The historical researcher Mercedes Montero recounts the origin and evolution of this project.

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The history of men and institutions is made up of lights and shadows, of joys and sorrows, of things that go well... and things that go wrong. But with the benefit of hindsight, and more so from a Christian perspective, these apparent failures do not always have the last word. Today we are going to talk about one of those things that went wrong, an initiative of the people of Opus Dei that we would not hesitate to call a failure.

The Minerva publishing house was the first cultural initiative by the faithful of Opus Dei throughout the world. It was launched in 1943 with great enthusiasm and with evangelising zeal and under the very direct encouragement of Saint Josemaría. But in a very short time it had to close.

However, it was not a wasted effort, because from this first pilot

publishing house and with the experience accumulated, the Rialp publishing house and so many other initiatives that Opus Dei members have launched all over the world, and, thank God, have been successful.

The Minerva project was an initiative launched by the women of Opus Dei between 1943 and 1946. The founder of Opus Dei had always been very keen that there should be good books, of spirituality and other genres, that would serve to lift the minds and hearts of people, to know the world better, and so on.

This idea could not be carried out before the Civil War. Afterwards, this idea was not forgotten and a person was found who could establish a publishing house for these types of books. This was María Natividad Jiménez Salas, an older woman with a degree in Philosophy and

Literature, who worked at the Higher Council for Scientific Research and who was never a member of Opus Dei. She was helped by two women from Opus Dei, Encarnación Ortega and Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri. They all helped, but they were the two people in charge.

At that time there was no Internet, no television. Radio had only just been invented. All this may seem very strange to us, but that's how it was and people read a lot. Therefore, there were many publishing houses before the war, some of them quite established and many others that were not so important.

After the war this sector, like all the others, was devastated. However, it is very striking how, in the 1940s, numerous publishing houses were born in Spain, many of them small and under the name of a publisher. The truth is that they published a

great many books. For example, a famous publishing house of this period was Gredos, which was born more or less at the same time as Minerva and was a great publishing house. Plaza y Janés was also born around the same time, inheriting everything left by José Janés, a publisher who died. Another important publishing house of this period was Lumen.

Although this project was started by the women of Opus Dei. The official editor was Alvaro del Portillo. I think there are several reasons for this because I haven't found one reason that can sufficiently explain why this was so nor is it clearly explained in the documentation. Firstly, this publishing house was linked to Opus Dei, to the founder, as a means of evangelisation. And it was something in which some men also participated in some way. It was an initiative in which the founder put a lot of

enthusiasm, so it makes sense that Álvaro del Portillo, who was his greatest collaborator, was the editor.

Also at that time, women were not allowed to do anything. We forget that, but after the Civil War, Franco's regime made women minors. She couldn't do anything without her father's or husband's permission. She went from obedience to her father to obedience to her husband. A woman could not own shares, for example, unless her husband allowed her to, even if she had the shares before because they had been given to her in her family, or if the family had a business. When a woman separated from her husband, she was taken to her father's house and the children always remained with the father. This is the Civil Code of the 19th century, to which Spain reverted. So it is very likely that none of the women who were in Minerva could have been editors of Minerva.

On the other hand, there were very few women in Opus Dei at that time. María Jiménez had a very good will and was a very capable person, but she was not a member of Opus Dei. That's why I think that Don Alvaro's solution was the most appropriate.

The promoters of Minerva had a very broad mentality. They basically thought of three types of books or three types of collections.

The first was called Neblí. It was to publish Spanish spiritual classics from the Golden Age. Neblí brought out their first book, which was *Victoria del amor*. The second collection they had in mind was a collection that I like to say was by women and for women, because it was a collection in which only women who were taking their first steps in literature in those years were going to write. For example, Josefina de la Maza. At the time,

having women who were being given their first opportunity to write was no small feat.

And then they were thinking of publishing books by important women who had perhaps been hidden in history. Or not so hidden, but they had not been given the same importance as men. They were thinking of translating Madame Savigny, Madame d'Estel, the Baroness d'Orsi, who is the author of *The Scarlet Pimpernel*. Then there were also people who had been Nobel Prize winners, or who were proposed for the Nobel Prize: Concha Espina, Gabriela Mistral and an Italian woman called Ada Negri, who has just been published. I saw her first book the other day. Also Matilde Cerrao. Another important Italian naturalist writer... Then María de Zayas, a writer who was condemned by the Inquisition in the 18th century and nobody has heard anything

about her since. Rosario de Madariaga... I mean, there were a lot of very interesting women writers.

It was also aimed exclusively at women, because it was the sector that was, shall we say, culturally most unprotected in all senses, from the upper classes to the humble classes. We thought of a reading guide with everything that came out. With a critique, the ages for which it was suitable and, of course, you have to take into account the period, whether they were suitable novels from a Christian point of view or not. Well, you have to take into account the time period and you have to take into account that Opus Dei was interested in publishing things that were Christian.

Although Minerva was a project that had many horizons, the reality is that it only worked for three years. The women of Opus Dei knew nothing

about publishing. María Jiménez Salas worked at the Higher Council for Scientific Research. She saw books being published, I imagine, but they were research books that depended on the state.

Publishing houses in those days were short-lived. For example, Lara, who later became the great patriarch of Planeta, started with a small publishing house that went under and then started with another one that went ahead, which grew and eventually became what Planeta is now. But before it got to this point, it went bankrupt many times.

Publishers went bankrupt a lot because people were very eager to publish books, but the economic and commercial side failed them. They had no idea what it cost. Spain was in the post-war period. Printing presses were few, expensive, not very good and material was difficult

to obtain. You couldn't get good paper. It was very expensive because there was a World War and you couldn't get paper in the Scandinavian countries, only in Canada, so everything was made in Spain. But the country was totally devastated and the paper that was made was unprintable. I've seen books published in the 1940s and the paper was appallingly bad, even in books from a prestigious publishing house, like the Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos.

They didn't think about this. The first book they brought out, which was called *Victoria del amor* (Victory of Love), which was actually Father Osuna's book, a part of the third spiritual primer, cost them a lot and was a disaster in terms of sales, although it had good reviews. So the founder of Opus Dei gave them his book *The Way*, which was already in its third edition. *The Way* was then a

big book. The second edition had been published by the publishing house Luz, which was then a very important publishing house, and it had sold out within a year. They asked him to publish it again and Saint Josemaría gave it to Minerva, who prepared the third edition (the fourth edition of *The Way* is now published by Rialp).

The Way was a magnificent book because these girls worked in way that was entirely manual, but very well. And I think that was — in my opinion, because there is nothing written about it — a way of recovering from

Victoria del amor.

The third book that Minerva published was another of St Josemaría's, the first edition of *Holy Rosary*. It was an edition that took a lot of blood to produce because it had to combine drawings and text, and it

had to be done by hand, cutting and pasting, and then including the drawings, until they matched the text in a balanced way. This took Guadalupe and María Jiménez a long time. It took months and months, and sometimes the founder had to add more things, more text. Finally the book was perfect and the edition was simply beautiful.

The book was on good paper, not as good as that of *Victoria del amor*, but it was a very elegant, smooth paper, which at that time was very difficult to obtain. And Borobio's drawings were pious, simple and at the same time very original, because all the borders he invented were very beautiful and were printed in green and red ink, apart from the black ink. At the end of each mystery there was a Christian symbol: an ear of corn, a fish.... And they were usually in two inks. This book was Minerva's last book, which also sold well.

But they were already taking Opus Dei to other parts of Spain. For example, they travelled a lot to cities where there were women who wanted to join the Work or had heard about it. Because in 1944, the ordinations of the first three priests of Opus Dei, who were engineers, had a great impact on public opinion. So did the death of Isidoro Zorzano and the opening of his beatification process.

Both things made many people aware of Opus Dei and, suddenly, many girls were emerging, in León and in Vigo... In unusual places, because the boys were emerging from places where there was a university, but the girls came out everywhere. And the women of Opus Dei began to travel by train to all these places to meet them.

In other words, there were few of them, they had to travel and they

couldn't take Minerva forward. Besides, Minerva still hadn't recovered from the losses in publishing *Victoria del amor* and María Jiménez Salas got more and more involved in her work, which was at the Higher Council for Scientific Research. Therefore, Minerva had to pass into other hands. And those hands were specifically those of Florentino Pérez-Embid, who, together with someone else, started Rialp.

Today, more than 70 years later, the Rialp publishing house is still in operation, partly thanks to Minerva's experience. I am sure that more than one of us has been reminded of what Saint Josemaría said about failure: "You have not failed: you have acquired experience." From this perspective, Minerva was not a failure, but a foundation stone.

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