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"We're Neither Angels nor Demons"

Marc Carroggio, who oversees Opus Dei's relationship with international journalists in Rome spoke on the book published by John L. Allen: "Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church". The interview was published by the Zenit News Agency

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Marc Carroggio, who oversees Opus Dei's relationship with international journalists in Rome, said he was satisfied with the book just published by John Allen. "Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church" has been published so far in English, Portuguese and Korean.

Carroggio told ZENIT that this is the first book that compares dispassionately the myths and reality surrounding "the Work," as it's called by Opus Dei members. "The author has understood well the nature of Opus Dei," Carroggio said.

Q: You must be happy since this book clears up many issues about Opus Dei.

Carroggio: I worked in the Rome press office while John Allen was writing this book. I can say that I am

satisfied with it, especially with respect to its method.

Allen spent hundreds of hours gathering a great deal of information and views from all sorts of people. He places all this information in its proper context, and so gives the rationale for many ways of doing things.

He has listened to both sides and been respectful to both. Finally, he leaves the readers to reach their own conclusions. These are desirable qualities for a book of this kind. The issues it deals with do not easily lend themselves to dialogue or dispassionate discussion.

Hence, any attempt to clear away false stereotypes is positive. I do not like comparisons, but I should point out that the author of "The Da Vinci Code" never visited a center of Opus Dei and, as far as I know, never spoke to any members. The picture of Opus

Dei presented in the novel is a figment of his imagination.

I think that John Allen's work can help readers of "The Da Vinci Code" who have no firsthand knowledge of Opus Dei to understand that we are neither angels nor demons. We are human beings with flesh and blood, who are sometimes wrong and sometimes right, who have faults but also want enthusiastically to follow an ideal.

Q: As he explains, the author had access to documents that are not available to the general public. He spent time in centers of numeraries, he interviewed dozens of members of the Work and he has absorbed what it means "to be in Opus Dei." In your view, what more would he need to understand Opus Dei better?

Carroggio: I think that the author has understood Opus Dei well: the nature

of its message, the reasons for the things it encourages people to do, its members' mode of life, our ideals and also where we fall short.

This book is a journalist's report, not a dissertation in theology or a treatise on the history of the Church. Its approach is sociological, although it also acknowledges and respects the spiritual dimension of things.

Allen himself says that he does not intend to give an exhaustive account of Opus Dei but rather to compare myths with reality. As a consequence, he devotes a lot of space to matters that are actually fairly secondary in the life of Opus Dei but which have received a lot of attention from the media, especially in the United States.

So, for example, one could say a lot more about the spiritual experience of belonging to Opus Dei and about the inner motivation that leads

persons to choose this path in their search for holiness in the middle of the world.

This would entail a larger treatment of each person's awareness of his or her own Christian vocation as well as persons' desire to follow Jesus Christ in their work, in their family and in their daily life. For an institution in the Church, the personal and existential dimensions are more important than organizational charts or questions of image.

Q: As part of his research, John Allen has also given the ex-members of Opus Dei a chance to speak. Do you think he has given too much space to their testimonies?

Carroggio: The book is a journalist's report, not a philosophical reflection on questions of principle. It is the result of a great number of

interviews with people in a variety of different situations.

In a work like this, it is the author himself who has to determine the proper balance among his sources. I respect Allen's decision here, because it seems completely legitimate to me.

Personally I think that he explains well how these sorts of criticisms differ from those that arise, if I might put it this way, from the writers of fantasy. It easy enough to show that Opus Dei is not behind the sinister operations and conspiracies so often attributed to it.

It is different, however, when we are dealing with a person who has had a negative experience. You cannot simply deny a wound, or pain, or bad memories. This is not just an issue of lies and truth.

When we encounter a person's negative experience, we have to

show our respect for it, we have to share that pain, even though at times we do not share that person's interpretation of the events.

The fact is that the faithful of Opus Dei live out their dedication to God with full freedom, and their dedication helps them to find happiness, at least the relative happiness that can be had in this world.

Hence the great majority of those who come to centers of Opus Dei have a lifelong appreciation for the Work. But this is not always the case. And so it does not seem wrong, but rather just the opposite, that a book like Allen's would include these cases, which I consider to be exceptions.

When Allen asked the prelate about this matter, Bishop [Javier] Echevarría said that we ask pardon with all our heart of those persons

who do not feel that they were well treated. As you can understand, I have nothing to add to that.

Q: Would you like to see a "Part Two" of this book?

Carroggio: Each book is unique and therein, it seems to me, lies its strength. Although John Allen's book is not merely a book about controversies, the emphasis is certainly on the more-debated issues.

In my opinion, he treats these questions respectfully and offers factual information more than partisan or ideological explanations of them.

Moreover, he makes an effort to summarize some of the essential characteristics of Opus Dei, such as divine filiation, freedom, the sanctification of work and ordinary life, etc.

I would like a future book to develop these aspects, and precisely in journalistic form.

Such a book would be able to describe in a fresh way the experience of living one's Christian life in the middle of the world. It would talk about how faith and prayers provide such admirable resources for one's ordinary life, including the more difficult times like sickness, unemployment or the death of a loved one. There is a lot to talk about.

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