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“Opus Dei’s message is spiritual, and it has never had a political agenda”

Historian José Luis González Gullón traces the history and character of Opus Dei in this interview, originally given to the Italian outlet Affari Italiani, published here in English to mark the release of his book “Opus Dei: A History” in Italy.

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'Historian José Luis González Gullón, professor at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and author of the book Opus Dei: A History, reconstructs the origins, controversies, and myths surrounding the Work.

Read the original interview in Italian at Affaritaliani.

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Nearly a century after its founding by **Saint Josemaría Escrivá**, Opus Dei continues to provoke sharply divided reactions: is it a spiritual movement or network of social influence? In his book *Opus Dei: A History*, José Luis González Gullón, professor at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, sets out to answer this question by reexamining historical documents and controversies. "Opus Dei's message is

spiritual, and it has never had a political agenda,” the historian explains, as he addresses some myths, controversies, and possible futures for the Work.

Opus Dei was founded by Saint Josemaría Escrivá in 1928.

Nearly a century later, what is its true legacy: a spiritual movement or an organizational model for Catholic presence in society?

Opus Dei is a Christian path, a charism that God gives to the world. The Work proclaims that each person is called to be united with Jesus wherever they live, wherever they work, wherever they find themselves. If you ask me what its legacy is, I would point to the lives of all the men and women who have lived this spirit to their last days — more than 30,000 of them, including Saint Josemaría, Blessed Álvaro del

Portillo and Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri — as well as the tens of thousands who live it today.

One of the most debated aspects concerns Opus Dei's relationship with political power. What is the real significance of historical ties to Francisco Franco's regime, and how much have those ties been magnified by public narratives?

For nearly a hundred years, Opus Dei has brought its spiritual message to countries and cultures of every kind, in keeping with the guidelines of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. In twentieth-century historiography, the Work is sometimes portrayed as a political arm of the Francoist regime, perhaps because General Franco organized his governments along the lines of political families, and because eight of the 119 ministers who served

under him throughout his rule came from Opus Dei. Professor **John Coverdale** and I have reviewed all the relevant documentation preserved in the Archive of the Prelature of Opus Dei.

What we found is that Saint Josemaría repeatedly affirmed that Opus Dei's message is spiritual, that members of the Work held a wide range of political affiliations even at that time, and that the Work never had a political program for Francoist Spain — just as it has never had political programs for any other country. Its aim was evangelization through the personal lives of its members and through activities in the educational and charitable spheres. In this regard, Saint Josemaría's consistent emphasis on personal freedom is striking: each person was encouraged to act and express themselves politically according to their own conscience,

without any political directive from the institution. At the time, this was a genuinely distinctive stance within the Church.

Another recurring accusation involves internal secrecy: membership lists aren't public, and there is a perceived opacity around activities and structures. Why would a religious organization need this level of reserve?

Saint Josemaría explained that, according to the spirit of Opus Dei, the first and most important form of evangelization is carried out by each person in the context of their own life and work, particularly within the family and in professional settings. In those everyday environments, faith is shared naturally, because it arises spontaneously from deep within.

At the institutional level, the founder established a structure for governance, coordination, and financing, which we examine in detail in the book. There were periods in which discretion regarding the Work's canonical status was requested, during years when a juridical change was necessary. Since its establishment as a personal prelature, however, the transparency of information has been considerable. The Opus Dei website lists its central directors and those present in various countries, along with their principal activities.

In Italy in 1986, Opus Dei became the subject of a parliamentary question. What was happening at that time for a Catholic organization to become a matter of political debate?

As a historian, I believe that the 1986 parliamentary question was more about the role of the Catholic Church in civil society and Italy's position within the geopolitical context of the era than about Opus Dei specifically. Those were years defined by intense international polarization and bloc confrontation. As is well known, the figure of **John Paul II** was under attack from the other side of the Iron Curtain, and this dynamic was reflected in the Italian political climate of the time.

Opus Dei is often associated with professional elites, universities, and major cities. Is it genuinely a movement of the ruling classes, or is that a caricature?

Opus Dei's evangelization activities have reached people across all social strata. In the book we examine a particularly revealing phenomenon: some thirty years after its founding, when a significant number of members were available, Saint Josemaría promoted the creation of dozens of professional schools in fields ranging from agriculture to secretarial work to hospitality, some of which remain active to this day.

I can also speak from personal experience. My father was a bank employee; my mother worked at home raising eight children and now cares for my ailing father. Both are members of Opus Dei, and it was

through them that I came to know the spirit of Saint Josemaría. I myself received a scholarship to cover my university expenses and have always lived modestly.

The book promises to tell the “unfiltered” history of Opus Dei. What is the most controversial or least known episode to emerge from the historical documentation?

I would point to the beatification of Saint Josemaría in 1992, a period when the founder was subjected to critical media campaigns that dissolved overnight, like a soap bubble, the day **Saint John Paul II** proclaimed him blessed. Professor Coverdale, who wrote the chapter on the beatification, carried out a meticulous analysis of the controversies of that moment with rigorous historical method.

Opus Dei has frequently been portrayed through novels, films, and conspiracy theories. To what extent have those narratives, from *The Da Vinci Code* onwards, distorted public perception of the Work?

Church institutions appear in literature and fiction from time to time, sometimes accurately and sometimes in distorted form. We see this even in portrayals of Jesus Christ himself. As far as Opus Dei is concerned, I think that today there is a great deal of reliable information available about its charism, its history, and its canonical status. I am not aware of studies that have analyzed current public perception of the Work in a systematic way. What seems most important to me is each person's capacity for critical thinking; their ability to seek out the truth about individuals and institutions for themselves.

Looking toward the next hundred years: what role will Opus Dei play in an increasingly secularized society that is growing more distant from the Church?

To help each person recognize that they have a divine vocation, one that gives full meaning to their life. The beauty of the Gospel is lived and shared above all in the family, in the relationship between spouses, with children, and among siblings. The realization that God is calling me, here and now, to be united with Jesus wherever I find myself is a source of joy, security, and hope.

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