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"Serving means growing and helping others grow"

Isabel Sánchez is Secretary of the Central Advisory, a council made up of women who advise the Prelate of Opus Dei. In this interview she speaks about her recent book "Northbound Women: Compasses for a Complicated World"

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Read the full interview by Álvaro Sánchez León in El Confidencial

Digital: “Las mujeres que dan más luz son las que aprenden a integrar al hombre en el proyecto de la nueva sociedad”

I'm glad to put a face to your name, to meet the woman responsible for the 50,000 women of Opus Dei around the world.

Yes, we're flesh and blood, just like everybody else.

And you're from Murcia, born shortly after May 1968... with a desire for revolution perhaps?

I was born there, but when growing up I lived in Albox, a village in Almería. I consider myself more a Mediterranean than a Murcian.

You moved to Rome in 1992, after studying law at the university. For more than half your life you've had a view of the whole world from the Eternal City. Can we

assume that Planeta Press wanted to draw on that accumulated experience?

Planeta asked me to write about my vision of women today. But they didn't ask me to write about my own life.

How would you summarize the situation of women today?

Full of potential, innovative, ready for today's challenges. I think that women help us focus on care for the person; the more we value and support women, the more we learn to put people first.

What does Opus Dei offer women? I'm thinking especially of those who don't know much about the Catholic Church, who see it only from a distance or through prejudices and stereotypes.

Opus Dei tries to help fulfil everyone's aspirations for greatness, which means holiness. First of all, it offers real examples of the "saints next door" Pope Francis talks about. About a year ago, Blessed Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri, a chemist, was raised to the altars. Opus Dei encourages all of us to try to improve our planet. And we have a great desire to dialogue with all women, including when we think differently.

Talk about the women who shine a light today, including in what we could call the twilight of a "brute force" feminism.

I think that women who include men in the project of building a new society, who don't declare war, shine the most light. They believe in a feminism based on equality and complementarity. Many of the stories in *Northbound Women: Compasses for a Complicated World* are about

these women. I don't know what each of them thinks about feminist theory, but I know the reality of their lives.

Are there feminist currents in the Catholic Church?

We could call them that. There are those who think that in order for women to be part of the structure of the Church they have to acquire power and overshadow men. There are women who undertake very just struggles to get to where they think they should be but aren't yet. And there are women – the majority of Christian women – who want to improve our world and serve society from right where they are.

And is there really a lobby for women priests?

Yes, there is. As Pope Francis says, I think it is a very clerical point of view. I'd love to redirect the

conversation and talk about ways to get the laity, men and women, into positions that, unintentionally, priests have historically filled.

In your book, you talk about women who want to shatter glass ceilings. Which ones?

All of them! In the book, I talk about ambitious women entrepreneurs who aren't afraid to serve from above but hit ceilings in the business world. I also talk about glass ceilings at home, when women are locked in and belittled because of a narrow vision of life and family. Anyone, man or woman, can dedicate him or herself to the home and can have a global vision and a universal heart from there, but it takes effort and study. The glass ceilings I talk about shattering are the ones that stifle women's hopes when they want to share their talents, wherever they are.

You run a multinational active in more than 70 countries, so I think we can say that you have a global vision. Is it still possible to “passionately love the world,” as St. Josemaría wrote, or is that something of the past, before the pandemic, labour abuses, and mass unemployment?

Sometimes we find it easier to love people who are sick or wounded. I think the same thing happens naturally when we contemplate our scourged, scarred world: we want to do everything we can to heal it. When we Christians walk the streets of our cities and towns, we need to do so knowing that we are God’s medicine for the world. We are responsible for society.

What does Opus Dei do to improve the world?

Opus Dei encourages and equips people. People change the world, and

Opus Dei helps them — always freely, boldly, and realistically — to get involved, dialogue with others, and take on projects. I had the privilege to write about some of them in my book. Veronique, for example, is a woman who understands that struggling with hard realities helps us appreciate life. She studied medicine in Paris and then moved to India, where she worked for many years and really became Indian. She's one of hundreds of people in Opus Dei who've given their all: career, nationality... And of course they call her crazy! But that's the kind of craziness that Opus Dei encourages, both in those who go to give their best in new, far-off places, and those who serve society by staying where they are.

Some women are criticized or dismissed for the size of their families. If they have many children, they're questioned,

looked at suspiciously, or set aside. But there are women with all kinds of families, big and small, in Opus Dei and everywhere. Especially given our current demographic crisis, wouldn't it make sense for our society to celebrate motherhood?

It makes perfect sense for us to celebrate motherhood and fatherhood. More than that, our society needs to make space for motherhood in the workplace, to recognize the great value, in men and women, of choosing to care for children at home. This is not only something to celebrate: we need to safeguard it. One of the stories in my book, for example, is about Tiziana Bernardi, former CEO of the Italian bank BPM, who fought for maternity and paternity rights for her employees, so that, when they became parents, they could announce it proudly.

What path is today's society on, and what role do women play in moving us forward? Do you think we need to make any course corrections?

I hope we are moving towards a more caring society. In the book I say that we're at a crossroads between care and disposal. We can choose to rely on people, who are fragile and vulnerable but human and therefore capable of working together, or on the transhumanist dream of perfection through machines. Women know what people are worth, and they have been preserving this heritage for centuries; hence they can light the way along the path. But caring for others needs to be honoured and valued by everyone, so it doesn't become a heavy burden for just a few.

Tell me about a woman of Opus Dei who is a pioneer in our world.

Guadalupe Ortiz de Landázuri comes to mind first. She's a pioneer in this world and a pioneer in the next, because in 2019 the Church declared her "Blessed." One of the reasons I wrote this book is because I could use part of the profits for scholarships in her name, to help women African scientists develop their careers in Europe in order to return and apply their talents in their own countries. In ten years, more than a hundred young women will have benefited from this aid, promoted as a way to give thanks for the first woman of Opus Dei to be beatified. I think Guadalupe would have loved this project because, besides being one of the first woman scientists in Spain, she spent her whole life supporting women in Spain, Italy, and Latin America.

Tell me about a woman in Opus Dei who struggles to make ends meet, but gives her all to become a saint.

Just one? I've met women like this in many parts of the world, including Mexican peasant women. They devote themselves to their farm and live one day at a time. They can't say what – if anything – they'll have tomorrow, but they live with a joyful sense of abandonment in God's hands because they are very conscious of being daughters of God. They are women who carry a great load of suffering, but nevertheless have an extraordinarily supernatural outlook.

Are these women empowered?

Yes, in a sense. They know very well how much they are worth, and that their lives influence many people for the better. Among other things, they know that part of their mission on earth is to forgive. Forgiveness is a

very healthy thing and it humanizes society very quickly. Every act of forgiveness casts a bright light.

But in most cases it's women who have to forgive...

Well, I hope we can bring men to the side of forgiveness as well! To be clear, forgiving does not mean giving in or bowing before injustice. In the book, I talk about my own experience testifying against the husband of a friend when she suffered a grave family injustice. Anyone who can support people who have been mistreated should do so; we cannot look the other way. But that is compatible with interior forgiveness, because suffering does not automatically compel us to carry a grudge.

Tell me about a woman in Opus Dei who shatters stereotypes.

I know Italian politicians – many of them – in different parties, in places people don't expect. In an organization with thousands of people, stereotypes are always misleading. Diversity is a beautiful reality in any large organization and in every institution of the Church.

Tell me about the women of Opus Dei who work in the domestic administrations of some residences.

They are women who find in the work of the home, of caring for others, a marvelous professional field. They are at the forefront of their profession and dedicate themselves to taking care of their own home and family, which is Opus Dei. Their passion and professionalism are models for all of us; they show us how to put people first in specific ways, in little details, before every project, process and

object. That's something we can bring to every kind of work, and whenever I see these women I relearn the value of all kinds of work, of the tasks that make up daily life.

Tell me about the new generations of women graduating from schools and educational institutions led by people of Opus Dei.

I hope they are women who dream big and who are eager to serve society, and I've seen many former students doing just that. In the book I talk about a Kenyan student who now works in the presidential palace and fights against the pressure and corruption around her, and about students at schools in very poor neighbourhoods, like Trigales or El Almendral in Chile, who've gone on to work in high-level professions without losing their desire to serve. I would love to see the students of

these schools going on to fight for equality between men and women in the workplace, building a more just society, and contributing to a better world through their own work.

Why is service looked down on?

We call it by different names, but I think that we're learning to appreciate the value of service more and more. We all admire collaborative, inclusive, transformational leadership, which is service. For some, the word connotes slavery or submission, but serving does not mean shrinking to allow others to grow. It's growing and helping others grow. Defined this way, I think we all recognize service as a path to a meaningful and happy life.

Tell me about the value of freedom in the organization you lead.

Opus Dei is a Christian organization, and the Christian God is a God of freedom who reveals Himself, calls us, and waits for a response. That's something incredible! We are responsible to Him, and He leaves us completely free.

As part of the Church, Opus Dei is steeped in freedom. St. Josemaría told us that we can't be anonymous in front of God, because we are children, we are free, and we are at home. The piety Opus Dei fosters is that of children in their own homes, and it's very liberating. We experience this essential interior freedom when we are with others, and we seek to respect their freedom as much as possible. That's not an easy task; it's something we need to learn every day over the course of our lives.

Are there any women of our times who inspire you in your life and you work?

There are many: many simple people, and some more well-known political figures, though I prefer not to name them because I want to be here for all the women of Opus Dei and for each of them to follow her own political path. In my work, my colleagues inspire me a lot. I learn a lot from them, like Marlies Kücking, who is older and has been with me for a long time, and who I talk about in the book. Those who've worked with Saint Josemaría are like an inheritance, a legacy. They've taught me how to work in freedom and with freedom. The women who enjoy serving and caring are the ones who inspire me most.

St. Teresa of Calcutta's daring defense of life inspires me greatly. And Tamara Ivanova Chikunova,

another woman I mention in the book, who has been fighting against the death penalty for years and has already succeeded in eight countries. When her son died in a terribly unjust way, rather than seeking vengeance, she started working to prevent future injustices. That kind of reaction is very inspiring to me.

Any men?

These days I have been thinking of Nadal and Federer a lot. I love to see friendship between rivals, and I've seen their evolution from on-court opponents to mutual admirers and friends. The ability to dialogue and learn — even from competitors! — and their constant determination to improve are very inspirational.

How do you explain to people why so many of Opus Dei's apostolates are offered separately to men and women?

Opus Dei is not yet 100 years old, and the truth is that until recently we didn't need to explain this, because many formative activities in the Church and in society were separate. Now we ourselves need to reflect on ways to appreciate and explain the charism our founder received. Saint Josemaría understood that all the spiritual and doctrinal formation in the Work would be given separately, but that is a small percentage of the Prelature's activities around the world. Our challenge now is to understand and explain this better. We are a young institution, ready to learn, and we're working on it.

Your book shows people of Opus Dei focused on the world outside themselves, on projects, work, and people, not thinking about the Prelature's activities all day long. Is that how the media understand Opus Dei? Or people on the street?

Maybe we don't know very well how to show people who we are. That's why I chose to write this book the way I did; as an invitation to take on today's challenges and to bring them into our living rooms. The challenges are clear and broad (like "peace," "solidarity," and "sustainability"), but to write about them I had to ground them in my own life and the lives of the people around me. All of us like to talk about ourselves and our own little world, and we need to keep learning to dialogue with others and to work together.

Is it considered anti-progressive, at least in Spain, to call yourself Catholic, Roman, and apostolic? Have you encountered prejudices?

I have come across many prejudices. Many interviewers have asked me why I admitted that I'm in Opus Dei at the beginning of the book, and whether I'm afraid that people will

dismiss me for it. Well, I'm not afraid. I am who I am, and I want to share that. Being in Opus Dei, for me, is something very enriching. I name ten challenges in the book, and I can't believe that we disagree on every one. I think we're losing our capacity for dialogue and openness. When the Pope talks about breaking down walls, the first ones I think of are the prejudices that separate us from one another. Some people are suspicious when they hear that someone is Christian, and some Christians are suspicious when they hear that someone is feminist. In both cases, we get defensive and assume, right away, that we are going to disagree. I'd like to dialogue more and judge less!

Why do people who want to do good things get bad press?

Such as?

Opus Dei.

Maybe we don't always do a good job at communicating the good that people who form part of Opus Dei do. Sometimes it's because we don't want to show off and we're trying to be discrete, since that's a very Christian attitude... But I think our world today needs examples. We need to share, not to brag, but so others can get to know and understand us, and join our good work. We can do this humbly, eager to celebrate others' talents.

The truth is that I expected to find you, a director of an international institution, a bit bureaucratic and distant — but here you are, a poet! I'm not sure whether most directors help us see the big picture, or if they tend to display the wrong side of the tapestry, the knots and rules and routines.

I really like talking about creative government. Inclusive, collaborative

leadership aims to help others grow, and that means innovating. I am fortunate to work with women who know how to see the big picture and take concrete action. That's something I've learned in my work in the central advisory of Opus Dei in Rome.

Do you write poetry?

Yes. I love it, especially in the evenings.

What's your poetic style?

At the moment it's very urban, but I went through a stage in which I loved Salinas' style. Right now I'm drawn to art that portrays everyday realities. I love photography too, especially urban photos.

Are there women of Opus Dei at the head of projects in other places in the world? In Africa, for example?

There are many. In Africa, they are leading educational and health initiatives in a special way. In societies where women don't have the position they should, they are raising awareness and working for non-violent change.

Do any of the social projects promoted by women of Opus Dei in Spain appeal to you particularly?

I love the Laguna Care Centre in Madrid, although it is not only an initiative of women of Opus Dei. It's a perfect example of what members of the Work can do: they arrive somewhere, see a particular need, and present a project to meet that need and serve society. In this case, they saw a need for greater end-of-life care and did everything they could to improve it. Right from the beginning they were able to support many families, and they've continued doing so throughout this pandemic.

They provide comprehensive care that's centered on the patient but helps the whole family; they transmit hope and support terminally ill people in a very special way. Hats off to the Laguna team!

Is Opus Dei's real objective to teach, to hold power, to change society, to convert people... all of the above, or none?

Opus Dei seeks to transform people so they want to aspire for the best in religion, which means coming close to God, and in their commitment to their world, which means loving it passionately. But that only happens if each person really and truly wants to be better. It's a great inner revolution.

Which of the themes of your book do you want to highlight most?

Above all, I want to shout from the rooftops that the antagonistic lens we

so often take to crucial questions doesn't help us see the solution. If we want to build a new society, we have to integrate talent – everyone's.

Pitting men and women, cultures and countercultures, and different races against each other only obscures our vision. When we give in to the “us against them” mentality, everything breaks down.

How is your contact with the press around your book release helping improve your work?

It's helping me understand the public perception of Opus Dei as an institution. For example, some journalists told me that they were amazed to learn that there are women in the Work! Well, there are, and they've been here since 1930. It's been a wake-up call: we women have to forge ahead; the world is important to us and they have to notice us. There are still journalists

who think that Opus Dei is rigid and monolithic, that we all think the same way... And it's not so. Real life in Opus Dei is something else altogether.

We need to keep improving our institutional communication. Maybe we need to show the good we do a little more, while humbly acknowledging, of course, that we may fall short even when we mean well. We are an institution of learning. Not everything comes out right the first time, and sometimes we hurt people and make mistakes along the way. We need to be relaxed enough to ask for forgiveness, as the Prelate did recently, when that happens.

Many people are starting the academic year with the hashtag “post-vacation depression” in their heads. You run an institution that talks about dreaming big in our

work, about jobs well done. Do you have some advice to help us look up when we're feeling down?

Opus Dei is a loudspeaker for an essentially Christian message: the most ordinary situations are springboards to bring us to God. Concretely, when our everyday work is interesting and engrossing, it teaches us to turn it from an idol to an ally of God, and when it is boring, from a burden to a path of personal fulfillment, service, and self-gift.

In this time of pandemic, something that helps me is focusing on what's possible and how it's possible. We may have to do things with masks and social distancing, but we can do them passionately! Our work is important, and we do a lot of good with it. Coronavirus has slowed us all down and helped us look at others more calmly; caring for the people around us is a real priority. Beyond

the world of work, I think that COVID has also brought us to our knees in front of God, or at least made us desire Him a little more or seek Him a little differently. Fostering that desire is going to help us all.

How is this pandemic changing the world? At the end of it, will we be better, or are we condemned to inertia?

The answer depends on each one of us. People who've overcome adversity can inspire us and make our journey easier. That's what I tried to show in the women I present in my book.

Has the Prelate of Opus Dei read your book?

The last I heard, he was on page 40. I don't know if he's still reading or if he's set it aside.

Two Spaniards at the top of the government of Opus Dei... Should we consider it a Spanish brand?

(Laughs) No! We are Spanish, but the whole world fits in our hearts. The Prelate, Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, has a very open mind. He has lived in Rome for many years and so have I. But from Rome, I'm constantly in contact with the needs of the whole planet. I'm very grateful for what my country has given me, but my gaze has been globalized.

Does Albox list you in its top 10 influential people?

(Laughs) It's possible...

And Murcia?

Who knows? I'm going there now, so let's see what I find.

Álvaro Sánchez León

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