

Opus Dei: Fact and Fiction

*on misrepresentations in Dan Brown's novel The Da Vinci Code
(Catalyst 3/2004)*

The Dan Brown book, The Da Vinci Code, is a best-selling work of fiction that discusses a real-life Catholic organization, Opus Dei. To help separate fact from fiction, we asked officials at Opus Dei to write a short article on this subject. Herewith their reply.

Founded in 1928 by St. Josemaría Escrivá, Opus Dei (Latin for “work of God”) has a mission of spreading Christ’s teaching on the universal call to holiness. A personal prelature, it works in dioceses around the world, with the approval of local bishops. Opus Dei has been the subject of several myths, made popular recently by the *Da Vinci Code*.

Myth: Opus Dei has a political agenda.

Fact: The only thing Opus Dei has to say about politics is what the Church says, and many of the Church’s social teachings leave room for different opinions on concrete political questions. In these opinionable matters, Opus Dei members make their own decisions just like other faithful Catholics. But you won’t understand Opus Dei until you realize that politics—whether civil or ecclesial—just isn’t its institutional focus. Opus Dei’s focus is on providing spiritual guidance to help people deepen their faith and integrate it with their daily life.

Myth: Opus Dei is a secret society.

Fact: The Opus Dei Prelature publishes the names of all its priests and all its international and regional directors. Like dioceses and parishes, it does not publish lay members’ names. Neither do health clubs for that matter, and people surely deserve as much privacy in their spiritual affairs as they do in medical matters. Members, however, are more than happy to

tell you of their membership and what Opus Dei is all about.

While we're at it, we can confirm that the Pope's spokesman, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, is a member, but we would like to dispel once and for all the rumors that Louis Freeh, Antonin Scalia, Clarence Thomas, and Mel Gibson are members.

Myth: Opus Dei brainwashes, coerces, or pressures members and potential members.

Fact: Opus Dei has complete respect for people's freedom. It's ludicrous to think that the Pope and bishops worldwide would support an institution that didn't. In this era of relativism, there are plenty of people who will call teaching the faith, giving spiritual guidance, and being a Christian witness "brainwashing," "coercion," and "recruiting" or "proselytism." Nowadays consenting adults are free of criticism for doing almost anything—anything apparently except trying to help people grow in their faith and practice it in their daily life.

Myth: Opus Dei makes its members practice dangerous corporal mortifications.

Fact: Each Lent, the Church reminds people that sacrifice is part of the spiritual life. To help its members follow this teaching, Opus Dei encourages them to make small sacrifices, such as persevering in their work or listening to those in need. The Catholic tradition also includes other penances, such as fasting and the use of a cilice or discipline, as means for deepening one's union with Christ. Many saints, including Opus Dei's founder, St. Josemaría Escrivá, have practiced such penances in a heroic way. Some celibate members of Opus Dei and of other Church institutions freely follow some of these customs, though in a mitigated way. They do so subject to the advice of their spiritual director and in a way that is never harmful to their health, completely unlike the *Da Vinci Code's* distorted representation. These kinds of sacrifices are certainly not a focus in Opus Dei, which emphasizes integrating faith with the activities of everyday

life.

***Myth:* Opus Dei's status as a "personal prelature" cuts it loose from oversight by the bishops.**

Fact: Like a diocese, a personal prelature is overseen by the Holy See. Additionally, Opus Dei receives permission from local bishops before starting apostolic work in their dioceses and keeps diocesan bishops informed about its activities. The guidance it offers its members pertains only to matters connected with its mission, which is educating people about the universal call to holiness and helping them fulfill this call in their daily life. The members of the prelature remain members of their diocese and are subject to their local bishop just like other Catholics.

***Myth:* With all the criticism, Opus Dei must be doing something wrong.**

Fact: Every successful organization has its critics, from Coca-Cola to the Catholic Church itself. As for Opus Dei's critics, anyone who does not believe in Christ, the Church's teachings, or loyalty to the Pope could easily have "issues" with Opus Dei, since it accepts all these things. It's also common that an organization's critics have personal reasons for misinterpreting things—even with good intentions. What's more relevant than the criticism is the fact that millions of people around the world know and love Opus Dei, including the Pope and a great number of bishops. This is because Opus Dei gives so much help to ordinary people who want to connect their faith with daily life.

For further information, contact the Opus Dei Information Office at info@opusdei.org or (212) 532-3570.