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Opus Dei Inside Story: Book By A Survivor

Beyond the Threshold: A Life in Opus Dei

Maria del Carmen Tapia
Continuum Publ, 364 pages, \$29.95 hardcover

Review by Kaye Ashe*

The little I knew about Opus Dei before reading this book was enough to make me uneasy about the increasing strength and visibility of the organization in the Catholic Church. Maria del Carmen Tapia's story deepened my wariness into something akin to dread. Her book is not, however, a cheap sensational exposé. It is the chronicle of an intelligent and sensitive woman who served the organization in responsible positions during her 18 year sojourn as a full member. Despite the inhumane treatment and psychological harassment she suffered at the hands of superiors during her last year in Opus Dei, she writes now "less from rancor than for the sake of historic justice."

Beyond the Threshold traces Tapia's journey from her first attraction to Opus Dei while working at the Council of Scientific Research in Madrid, Spain, to her virtual imprisonment at the organization's headquarters in Rome in 1965-1966, a nightmare that culminated in her forced request for release from her obligations to "The Work."

Tapia served for almost five years as personal secretary to the founder of Opus Dei, Msgr. José María Escrivá, and for nine years as regional director of the Women's Branch of Venezuela.

The view we get of Opus Dei in this account is that of a full member who served in the internal administration of the organization. It is the view, furthermore, of a disillusioned former member who stresses the sect-like characteristics of an institution she has come to view as a "church within the Church."

According to Tapia, her formation in Opus Dei bore the marks of determined indoctrination, not to say shameless brain-washing. Superiors encouraged a cultic and worshipful reverence for the founder, whose words and directives were never to be questioned or critiqued. His authority was God-like, and love for him was to outweigh love for parents or Pope.

The weekly "confidence" or fraternal chat, in which full members bared their souls to the local directress, molded them into unthinking instruments of the organization. The duty of "fraternal correction" imposed on members in their relation to one another and a coded system of reporting on those guilty of "bad spirit" or faults against unity, reinforced an atmosphere of guilt and suspicion.

Particularly in Rome, a brutal schedule of physical work, the lack of contact with family, friends or outside events and a detailed plan of spiritual development, narrowly focused on Opus Dei regulations, left little time for anything beyond "The Work" and "the Father" (Escrivá). Onto this background of oppressive control, Tapia sometimes sketches in crushing detail, furnished by a formidable memory, what she terms "the making of a fanatic."

What is bound to strike members of religious congregations is the similarity between the formation received by full members of Opus Dei ("numeraries," who compose about 20 percent of the membership) and the life lived in pre-Vatican II novitiates and convents. We find the same emphasis on physical labor, on rules, meditation, silence, distance from the distractions of "the

world," leaving the house only in pairs, the handling of all financial affairs by appointed officials, suspicion of "particular friendships," celibacy, unquestioning obedience and mortification.

Indeed, all of this seems, if anything, bleaker and more pronounced in Opus Dei than in the old religious communities. In regard to mortification, for instance, no contemporary religious, to my knowledge, was ever asked to wear the cilice (a knotted band of rough wool worn tightly around the thigh during specified periods) or once a week to inflict upon herself 33 vigorous blows to the buttocks.

The similarities that exist are all the more surprising given that the founding impulse of Opus Dei, and its continuing charism is to provide the church with a cadre of laymen and women served by priests ordained within the organization. Indeed, Escrivá insisted on the distinctly lay nature of the vocation and spirituality of the members of Opus Dei as opposed to those of members of religious congregations.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Tapia's chronicle is the contrast she draws between the male and female numeraries of Opus Dei, more marked apparently in her day than at present.

Women had to submit to a certain dress code, could not smoke and were required to sleep on wooden planks (the men had mattresses). Women designated as electresses have only passive voice, that is, their opinion was to be taken into account on the final ballot for the election of the prelate (head of Opus Dei), which is cast by the general council, a body composed of the men in the central government of the organization.

Furthermore women, whether numeraries or numerary auxiliaries (servants), were (are?) responsible for the cleaning, laundry, cooking and serving in both their own and the men's quarters and residences. Women, in other words, provided cheap, quiet, invisible labor, assuring a comfortable lifestyle for the men of the institution.

Readers who suspect that Opus Dei's recruitment policies are questionable, its financial

and business practices sometimes devious and its deference to the powerful and wealthy self-serving, will find much to confirm their suspicions in Tapia's narrative. If they had reason to wonder at the speedy beatification of its founder in 1992, 17 years after his death, their mystification will double as they see him through Tapia's eyes: a self-preoccupied, overly-authoritarian man given to loud and angry tantrums.

What they will not find is an answer to why the organization enjoys the support of the highest reaches of the Catholic hierarchy and why it has attracted 80,000 dedicated members in 90 nations around the globe. Those who wish to examine other faces of this complex, hierarchical and multi-national organization, and who would like to pursue further the polemic and paradoxes that continue to surround it, will find leads in the lengthy bibliography furnished by the author.

In addition to a highly personal account of the inner workings of Opus Dei, Tapia offers documentation in three appendices: correspondence with officials in Opus Dei who stubbornly refused to acknowledge her course of studies while she was a member; correspondence between the founder and her father; and letters to Pope John Paul II in which she cautions him against beatifying Escrivá.

This book, a bestseller in Spain, Portugal, Germany and Italy, is sure to attract the attention of a large American audience curious but not well-informed about the history, organization, policies, beliefs and driving force behind the 20th century Catholic phenomenon known as Opus Dei.

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