

Editorial Reflections

What is Happening to "Church"? Renewal out of Control?

Certainly there has been no time in recent history when so many people have been in so much turmoil over questions about "How to do church?" Or, "What should church be like?" Or "What is wrong with church?" Or "Why are all the traditional churches declining?" These are missionary questions, too.

We see and hear about all kinds of new experiments from tiny house churches to large "seeker" churches, "Emergent churches," etc. A recent piece in *Christianity Today* (July 2007) tells about a church in Texas which has its members at work in their spare time in far-off places all across the globe. What are those members doing? Building buildings, teaching Sunday School, operating temporary clinics. What is it doing to the congregation back in Texas? Great things. It's exciting. George Barna in his *Revolution* (IJFM 23:3) threatens us with the news that we are losing hundreds of thousands of Evangelicals not to non-faith but to a life of faith outside the kind of church life we would expect. They, he says, have found more active ways to express their faith. Are all these basically uniformed efforts truly strategic? Is this renewal out of control?

Okay, there is no use denying all this or hiding our eyes. We are also losing a lot of people to a new militant atheism, but that is another subject. Here I want to concentrate on the opposite: the amazing explosion of earnest, near fanatical faith around the country and around the world. While these movements of faith are totally demolishing all the woeful predictions about the inevitable demise of religion in general and Christianity in particular, nevertheless there are strange weaknesses in this abundant newness.

So, while there are many other problems, one of our "problems" is to understand better *how to channel a new surge of faith*. Here I want to focus on the fact that this is not just a Protestant or Evangelical problem. It is a phenomenon we see in the wave of young people within Islam who are willing to blow themselves up for Allah. And, it is a development to be seen in the Roman Catholic sphere as well. Let's look more closely at the latter.

Thanks to *The DaVinci Code* book we all have heard about Opus Dei, this huge, shadowy network of "supercatholics" whose influence is perfectly enormous, affecting everything from personal spirituality to government, education, politics, you name it. As you will see, it is not altogether different from parallel phenomena within Protestantism where new movements are both ignoring and invading settled parishes with a "renewed" understanding of the faith that conflicts with the traditional ways of thinking and worshiping. Is this what Jesus meant by the need for new wineskins for new wine?

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One parallel is the concept that these new ways are not only the real thing but that the old ways are inadequate or invalid. In Evangelicalism we have had some people taken over by the belief that while they were filled with the Holy Spirit most others weren't. In some cases true spirituality had to include, necessarily, the raising of the hands in worship, dancing in services, or other exciting things. Hundreds of churches have split over this kind of thing. If not that, many churches have ended up with both "traditional" and "contemporary" services. At one point some talked as though God's normal business was to change silver fillings to gold fillings. If you did not go along with that you simply lacked faith. On the other hand, how can sitting down to sing be the only way to go?

Opus Dei is not brand new. Father Escrivá, the founder and long the driving force, was born in 1902 and died in 1975. He was made a saint in record time, in 2002. Opus Dei significantly developed its shape prior to Vatican II (1962-1965) and for that reason is unhappy about Vatican II results. This explains why John Paul II and the current Pope, Benedict XVI, (both decidedly pro Opus Dei) have dragged their feet in implementing the council, with Benedict recently going back to make the Latin mass available, etc.

But, for the first time, unlike any other previous Catholic structure in history, Opus Dei has incorporated lay people into its ranks. It has found out how to make ordinary life a holy calling. Its various categories of members, who are essentially under military discipline, only number 85,000 (but compare that to the much smaller membership of Navigators, or Campus Crusade, or YWAM) while its global (and powerful) constituency, including auxiliaries, is over a quarter of a million.

Meanwhile, far less known to the Protestant world are three similar (mainly lay) movements that are more recent: Communion and Liberation (CL), Focolare, and Neocatechumenate (NC). A fourth, mainly clerical and much younger, is Legion of Christ. The three large worldwide networks incorporate literally millions of eager super pro-Catholic lay people (and priests) in a total force which in a variety of ways is trying to renew, restore, and revivify the church. A joint conference of twenty movements twenty years ago, way back in 1987, claimed to represent 30 million members “dedicated to total militancy.” In regard to these last four movements I am drawing on a very well-written book by a former Focolare member, Gordon Urquhart, *The Pope’s Armada: Unlocking the Secrets of Mysterious and Powerful New Sects in the Church*. It does not deal in depth with Opus Dei, however.

All of these movements implicitly regard a personal, spiritual experience as far more important than what has traditionally been sufficient to be a “good Catholic.” In effect they deny the formal church for its deadness and yet affirm it for what it could be—if only everyone in the church were to become as turned on and, I would add, as fanatical as their own members are and are expected to be. These organizations may be friends or competitors or even enemies of each other. The jaundiced view of the Jesuits on the part of Opus Dei’s founder is well known.

The CL and the Focolare essentially ignore the parish structure, somewhat like the Navigators and InterVarsity in their early days. By contrast, the NC seeks to take over parishes, something like the “Charismatic Movement.” In contrast, YWAM did not fight for control but came out of the Assemblies of God rather than work within it, though it wanted to stay within. The NC believes in the parish structure only if they can gain control of it—and that is their main goal. Thus, on the one hand, you can hear parish priests lamenting CL and Focolare “siphoning off their most committed members” (p. 83) and leaving their

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local parishes bare of leadership—an attitude not unknown in the Evangelical world when it is parachurch vs. congregation. On the other hand, you can sympathize with the parish priest who finds himself replaced as NC invades and takes total control of his parish.

Another objection voiced by clerics was

Some movements imagine they are going to save the world and behave as though they know the only way to be authentically Christian. They tend to self-sufficiency. Sometimes they have a spirituality of a pietistic kind which stresses personal salvation, with not the slightest effect on life. (p. 74)

Does this sound familiar?

Opus Dei has been around longer than the others just mentioned, beginning in one sense in 1928. Maria del Carmen Tapía struggled out of its membership late in the 1960s. After years of mental turmoil she finally wrote a book which became very famous, *Beyond the Threshold: A Life in Opus Dei* (1992, reprinted in 1999). It is an absolutely fascinating personal story. While she does not doubt the fundamental integrity of Escrivá, her story reveals feet of clay in both him and the practical outworkings of his organization, the unreasonable secrecy, the relentless isolation of members from their families and so forth.

In 1971, Michael Walsh, a former Jesuit and later a church historian at the University of London, wrote an article, “Being Fair to Opus Dei.” Being an outsider, Walsh’s comments were considered hostile by insiders. In 1983 he decided to write a book, *Opus Dei: An Investigation Into the Powerful Secretive Society Within the Catholic Church*, which came out in 1989. In 2004 this book was republished with seven pages of additional comments reflecting the publicity bombshell of *The Da Vinci Code*. The latter’s millions of copies were perhaps snapped up often by people whose fears of religion in general have been fueled by the rise and prominence of Evangelicalism. *The Da Vinci Code* was so extremely critical of Opus Dei (and Christian beliefs in general) that it incidentally made Opus Dei known far and wide almost overnight.

Another book emerging in 1997, previous to the *Da Vinci Code*, was written by a former member, Robert Hutchison. With both a critical title and text, *Their Kingdom Come:*

Inside the Secret World of Opus Dei is a very detailed account from the beginning of the story. It is appreciative in some ways but comes out with devastating accusations.

Then in 2005, came *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church*. This one is by a professional journalist who is the Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, John L. Allen, Jr. It too reappeared (2007) with an additional 18-page preface building on the outlandishly negative portrayal of Opus Dei in the runaway bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*.

After *The Da Vinci Code* but before the movie there appeared a book very favorable to Opus Dei. Maggy Whitehouse, an English professional writer, produced *Opus Dei: The Truth Behind the Myth* (2006). A little later, the very same book in a different binding was brought out by a different publisher, and was called *The Secret History of Opus Dei* (2007). Large format, lavishly illustrated in full color, both editions are no doubt part of the enormous and diligent effort of the Opus Dei to counteract the excessively negative view of their organization in *The Da Vinci Code*.

Opus Dei has a background amidst an early fear-traumatized population of Spain (in its civil war period thousands of churches were burned and thousands of priests killed). In that light if Opus Dei ever wished to forever be a behind-the-scenes organization, recent events and even these books alone would have made that wish permanently impossible. There is a huge amount of factual information in these books for anyone to see. It is certain that its members represent a mountain of awfully sincere, believing people. It is equally clear that such willingness to believe does not guarantee inevitable insight into God's will on earth.

What is of greatest interest to me, however, is that these five organizations demonstrate the existence of an unexpectedly large number of people in this world who are earnestly and happily willing to believe extravagantly. Oh, they speak in tongues, too. Here is a quote for you: "Today, Rome's venerable basilicas are more likely to echo with the babble of a congregation speaking in tongues." (Urquhart:169) In contrast to their basic intensity, it seems easy and at times hollow to find people who will merely "accept Jesus as their Savior," raise their hands in worship, be slain in the Spirit, or dance around the altar, but that is only a partial achievement. Committing all out to what it means for God's will to be done "on earth as it is in heaven"

is a vastly bigger hurdle and requires a lot more knowledge and insight than can be seen in these virile movements, Protestant or Catholic. Proverbs 19:2 (Message) says, "Ignorant zeal is worthless." In a way that translation is an overstatement. However, it seems certain that what might be called "overbelief" can become meaningless or dangerous. Urquhart (119) quotes an observer saying that these movements are "mass producing immature enthusiasts." That can't be bad, if only what comes next is good.

It is heart-wrenching to see keen, dedicated young people, whether Protestant or Catholic, so unreservedly willing to give their lives but unable to find an effective, substantially knowledgeable career to follow, one which they can understand is a holy calling, clearly addressing the most significant barriers to God's will on earth. As a result, in addition to possibly high attrition, this combination of marvelous energy and sincere belief is often channeled into relatively superficial and amateurish directions. Perhaps their leaders are unaware of the hundreds of excellent and wise mission agencies (for example) that already exist.

Young people may easily believe God will tell them personally what people group to go to reach, maybe by poking their finger in the Bible, without any thought of letting a mature agency make that decision for them. Often this happens because the young people have been with a group which, they are told, has discovered some kind of deeper spirituality than other groups possess. Even their own thinking is guided by just their own particular leaders.

In any case, stepping back for an overview of the whole world, it would not seem to be a problem of there not being enough believers. It is the unexpected problem of too many "overbelievers," believers who have all too often recklessly bought into some new shortcut, some new and novel spirituality. Often their earnest search for God's will ends up being either what they deep down already prefer, or it represents the superficial guidance of relatively uninformed but "inspired leaders."

One might be tempted to think, "Let's not win any more people to Christ until we do right by these hundreds of thousands who are groping their way forward in a vacuum of solid knowledge." On the other hand, there are those doing serious study (like the 8,000 students per year in the Perspectives Study Program) who are in a different world. The movements we're talking about are to some extent out to reinvent the wheel. Maybe that's necessary to some extent? **IJFM**