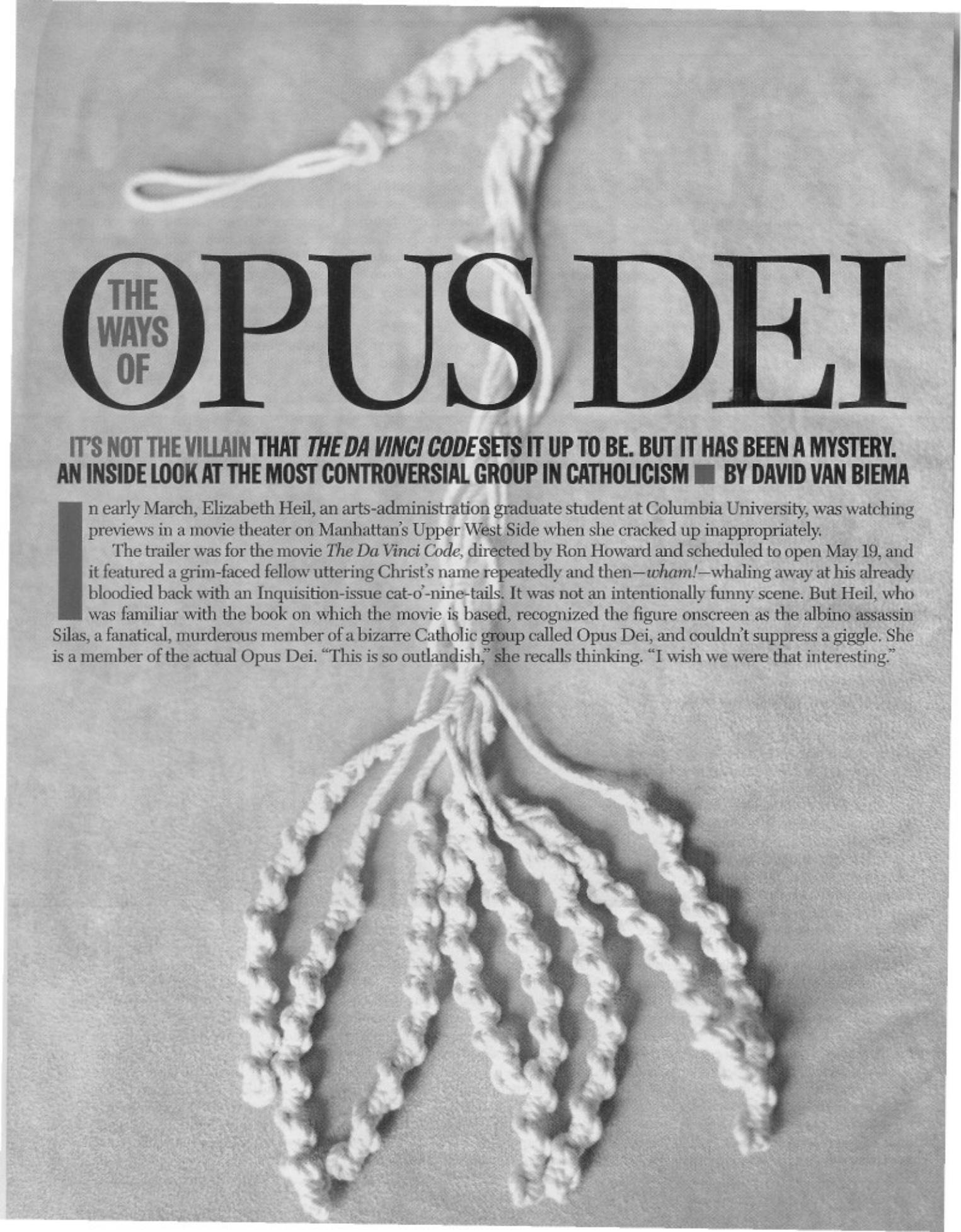


THE WAYS OF OPUS DEI

IT'S NOT THE VILLAIN THAT *THE DA VINCI CODE* SETS IT UP TO BE. BUT IT HAS BEEN A MYSTERY. AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL GROUP IN CATHOLICISM ■ BY DAVID VAN BIEMA

In early March, Elizabeth Heil, an arts-administration graduate student at Columbia University, was watching previews in a movie theater on Manhattan's Upper West Side when she cracked up inappropriately.

The trailer was for the movie *The Da Vinci Code*, directed by Ron Howard and scheduled to open May 19, and it featured a grim-faced fellow uttering Christ's name repeatedly and then—*wham!*—whaling away at his already bloodied back with an Inquisition-issue cat-o'-nine-tails. It was not an intentionally funny scene. But Heil, who was familiar with the book on which the movie is based, recognized the figure onscreen as the albino assassin Silas, a fanatical, murderous member of a bizarre Catholic group called Opus Dei, and couldn't suppress a giggle. She is a member of the actual Opus Dei. "This is so outlandish," she recalls thinking. "I wish we were that interesting."

The Da Vinci Code's Opus Dei—a powerful, ultraconservative Roman Catholic faction riddled with sadomasochistic ritual, one of whose members commits serial murder in pursuit of a church-threatening secret—is obviously not reflective of the real-life organization (although author Dan Brown's website states the portrayal was "based on numerous books written about Opus Dei as well as on my own personal interviews"). Yet in casting the group as his heavy, Brown was as shrewd as someone setting up an innocent man for a crime. You don't choose the head of the Rotary. You single out the secretive guy at the end of the block with the off-putting tics, who perhaps has a couple of incidents in his past that will hinder an effective defense. That's not Heil, but it's not a bad sketch of the organization to which she belongs.

In its 78 years, Opus Dei has been a rumor magnet. Successful and secretive, it has been accused of using lavish riches and carefully cultivated clout to do everything from propping up Francisco Franco's Spanish dictatorship to pushing through its founder's premature sainthood to planting conservative minions in governments from Warsaw to Washington. Brown's treatment of the group had seemed to represent an untoppable high-sewage mark—that is, until the movie trailer appeared. Says Juan Manuel Mora, director of Opus Dei's communications department in Rome: "Reading a print version is one thing. Seeing the color images is another."

Yet Mora and his colleagues have inaugurated a countertrend, in part by breaking their organization's historical silence. They spoke at length on record to John Allen, a respected print and television Vatican commentator, and offered him unprecedented access to Opus Dei records and personnel. In November he responded with *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church* (Doubleday), probably the most informed and sympathetic treatment of the group ever penned by an outsider. Opus has since talked freely to other journalists, including TIME's.

But Opus' public relations offensive hasn't quite managed to close the gap between what critics say it is about and its own version of the story. On one side there is "Octopus Dei," or, as the current issue of *Harper's* magazine puts it, "to a great extent ... an authoritarian and semi-clandestine enterprise that manages to infiltrate its indoctrinated technocrats, politicos and administrators into the highest levels of the state." On the other is the portrait painted by Opus' U.S. vicar Thomas Bohlin, who sat for several hours with TIME at his group's Manhattan head-

THE MOVIE

Can a Thriller Be Both Fair and Fun?

By RICHARD CORLISS

ON JAN. 10, AT VILLA TEVERE, THE Rome headquarters of Opus Dei, a couple of dozen men convened in a chamber similar to the one in which *The Da Vinci Code's* Bishop Aringarosa was handed €20 million in Vatican bonds to set his nefarious plot in motion. From London, Paris, Milan, Madrid, New York City, Lagos and Montreal they had come, to draft a plan against a man they felt posed the most virulent threat to their order: director Ron Howard.

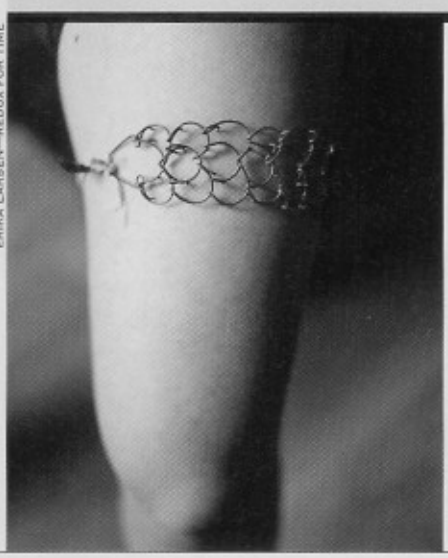
Dan Brown's best seller (40 million copies in 44 languages, with 6 million paperbacks sold since they arrived in bookstores March 28) portrayed Opus Dei as an ecclesiastical Cosa Nostra. That was painful enough for the secretive Roman Catholic society. But the thought of having those words put into pictures called for direct action, especially after the group's attempts to negotiate with the filmmakers were declined. "We could not just sit still and wait for the flagellation of the film itself," says Juan Manuel Mora, director of Opus Dei's communications department. "Nobody wanted a battleground. But not just silence either."

The society named its campaign Operation Lemonade "on the strength of the adage 'If you're handed lemons, make lemonade,'" says Mora, who has not seen the film. "But more often it's simply Operation *Da Vinci Code*." The document produced at that January meeting had three talking

TEAMWORK: Audrey Tautou and Tom Hanks sleuth through church lore in *The Da Vinci Code*

points: 1) Turn the glare of publicity into a proselytizing opportunity. "We can either weep, or we can sing our song," says Mora, postulating that some people, learning about the nonfictional Opus Dei, will think, Well, it's not that bad. 2) Reach out for allies: "This film offends all Catholics, not just Opus Dei. It says the entire church is a big lie." 3) Engage only in measured discourse. Says Mora: "Any aggressive tone would have played into the marketing of the film."

The picture, which critics had expected to see this month, is not scheduled to be screened until its premiere at the Cannes Film Festival on May 17, two days before it opens in wide release in the U.S. Nor is



ERIKA LARSEN—REDUX FOR TIME

Decoding the Secrets of Opus Dei

A guide to some frequently used terms

ASSOCIATES Members who follow the most rigorous spiritual practices of Opus Dei life (including celibacy) but do not live in residence or retreat centers

◀ **CILICE** A spiked chain that some members strap around their upper thigh for two hours a day as an act of penance

COOPERATORS Nonmembers who support the group through prayer, volunteer work or financial contributions

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there definitive word on the movie's treatment of Opus Dei or even whether the group's name is mentioned.

For outreach, the filmmakers hired a religious marketing firm and consulted with Catholic scholars from Notre Dame and Harvard. But Brown's novel remains the movie's canonical text. "People expect to see the book they read," says a source who worked on the film. "The filmmakers, however, were mindful of the concerns. When Opus Dei officials see the movie, I won't say they won't have any concerns, but those concerns will likely be much less than what they've been afraid of."

Howard wants the movie to be seen as faithful to the novel but not noxious to the faithful. "With something as controversial as this," says Howard, "if you try to soften the edges, you're kidding yourself. Either you're dealing with these ideas or you're not." Asked about the book's villainous cabal, he acknowledges, "Yeah, Opus Dei is in the movie." Then, moments later, "I don't say it in the movie one way or the other"—hinting that the society is described but not identified.

So there's the double paradox: the clandestine Opus Dei is opening up while *The Da Vinci Code's* publicity-savvy makers are clamming up. ***—Reported by Jordan Bonfante/Rome and Jeffrey Ressner/Los Angeles***

DISCIPLINE A small, cordlike whip that some members use once a week to flagellate themselves during the recitation of a prayer

FIDELITY The act of pledging a lifetime commitment to the organization

THE NORMS Spiritual obligations that all members perform daily, including attending Mass, praying silently for 30 minutes twice a day and reciting the Rosary and other prayers usually after supper

NUMERARIES The most committed members, who take vows of celibacy, live in Opus Dei centers and practice corporal self-punishment

NUMERARY ASSISTANTS A subset of the numerary class composed exclusively of women who perform domestic duties in Opus Dei facilities

"PAX" AND "IN AETERNUM" The greetings of "Peace" and "In eternity" that members exchange

SUPERNUMERARIES The less formal category of membership, which allows people to have families and live in their own homes

THE WORK The shorthand expression referring to "the Work of God," the English translation of Opus Dei

WHISTLING The act of writing a letter to request membership in Opus Dei, a reference to the sound of a kettle when it boils

quarters. Opus, he explained, is just a teaching entity, a kind of advanced school for Catholic spiritual formation with minimal global coordination or input as to how members and sympathizers apply what they learn. "You know Dale Carnegie courses?" he asked. "Businesses send their people there to learn to speak better, to organize—they teach all these kinds of things. People go there because they get something out of it, and then when they graduate, they don't represent Dale Carnegie."

James Martin, an editor at the Jesuit publication *America* who has written critically about Opus, offers a middle ground between Dale Carnegie and the octopus: "Opus Dei provides members with an overarching spirituality for their life," he suggests. "It's an ongoing relationship that helps buttress and further shape the thought of people who are already conservative Catholics. That's a powerful symbiosis, and there's a personal connection between members, whether they're housewives or politicians. It's not an evil empire, but that doesn't mean there aren't serious issues that need to be addressed."

A first journalistic pass, by Allen or TIME, cannot fully resolve all those issues. But it can answer some of the questions that have long dogged the organization, and it may also show how *The Da Vinci Code* could end up helping Opus Dei.

HOW DID IT START?

ON OCT. 2, 1928, A 26-YEAR-OLD SPANISH priest named Josemaría Escrivá was visited by a new vision of Catholic spirituality: a movement of pious laypeople who would, by prayerful contemplation and the dedication of their labor to Christ, extend the holiness of church on Sunday into their everyday work life. Escrivá's title for the movement was a literal description—Opus Dei means "the work of God"—and his ambition was correspondingly large. He saw Opus eventually acting as "an intravenous injection [of holiness] in the bloodstream of society."

It was controversial almost from birth. Opus threatened the era's Catholic clericalism, which privileged priests, monks and nuns over the laity, and Escrivá was called a heretic. In the 1950s, several prominent Opus Dei members joined Franco's dictatorial but church-supportive regime in Spain, inaugurating speculation about the group's political leanings. The church's Second Vatican Council (1962-65) seemed to catch up with Escrivá's idea of lay activism—but his rigid adherence to Catholic teaching put his system at odds with liberals who accorded the laity a wide freedom of conscience. He himself was a polarizing figure, humble

and grandiose, avuncular and ferocious. Opus grew slowly but steadily, remaining below the radar of most Catholics.

That all changed in 1982. Pope John Paul II, also a creative traditionalist interested in labor and faith, granted Escrivá's wish that Opus be a "personal prelature," a global quasi-diocese, able in some cases to leapfrog local archbishops and deal directly with Rome. Almost simultaneously the Pope publicly constricted the competing, more liberal Jesuit order. A perception that Opus' ecclesiastical power knew no limits peaked with Escrivá's 1992 beatification, a brief (for those days) 17 years after his death. Faultfinders, notes Allen, claimed that the judging panel had been packed and Escrivá's critics blackballed; they viewed his fast move toward sainthood as the muscle-flexing "ecclesiastical equivalent of [the Roman emperor] Caligula making his horse a senator." Allen sees the beatification as legitimate, as did 300,000 people who thronged Rome for Escrivá's 2002 canonization.

WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE?

OPUS DEI IS NOT A KIND OF SPIRITUAL PICK-me-up for casual Catholics. It features a small, committed membership (85,500 worldwide and a mere 3,000 in the U.S.), many of whom come from pious families and are prepared to embrace unpopular church teachings such as its birth-control ban. Members take part in a rigorous course of spiritual "formation" stressing church doctrine and contemplation plus Escrivá's philosophy of work and personal holiness. Opus' core is its "numeraries," the 20% who, despite remaining lay, pledge celibacy, live together in one of about 1,700 sex-segregated "centers" and extend their training to a degree rivaling a priest's—all while holding day jobs, with most of their pay devolving to the group. That near cloistered life produces the group's most avid, satisfied members and its bitterest dropouts. Opus steers a small number of members toward the priesthood, and they exert considerable influence on the lay majority.

Some 70% of the membership, called supernumeraries, are much more of this world. They bend Opus' daily two hours of religious observance around a more typical—or perhaps retro, given the large size of many of their families—existence. Opus' sureties provide a spiritual grounding to life's everyday chaos and ambiguities. While she was raising seven children in the anything-goes 1970s, says Cathy Hickey of Larchmont, N.Y., Opus

NGOZI & SILAS AGBIM

Finding Sanctity in All Tasks

Although he shares the same first name and is also associated with Opus Dei, Silas Agbim couldn't be more different from the fanatical albino monk who goes on an international murder spree in the book *The Da Vinci Code*. Agbim is a slight, unassuming Nigerian immigrant in his 60s who lives quietly in Brooklyn, N.Y., with his wife Ngozi. But as the release of *The Da Vinci Code* film version approaches, the Agbims, who have been supernumeraries—members of Opus Dei who live outside its residences—for almost 30 years, have been speaking out about their experiences in the organization. Silas (the real one) says he doesn't mind his unusually earned public profile: "I am pleased with the publicity in a way. It helps counter some of the impressions that the author of *The Da Vinci Code*, Dan Brown, was trying to portray about Opus Dei, the church and Christianity in general."

A friend told the couple about the group while they were on vacation in the Ivory Coast in the mid-1970s. Intrigued, they decided to check it out when they returned to New York and, finding it to be a "connection between the theory and the practice" of their Catholic faith, joined a few years later. A stockbroker, Silas says the organization has helped him find a way to bring his faith into his professional life. Every workaday task becomes an opportunity to impress God. "You don't just buy [a stock] because it's on the buying list," he says. "You have to do independent research. You have to be sure that this is someplace you would put your [own] money. Your conscience is being touched."

Ngozi, a retired college professor also in her 60s, applies the same approach to the charitable works she says her affiliation with Opus Dei has inspired her to take on. Recently she initiated a book-collection project for a library in Nigeria. "We're not sending trashy things," she explains. "We got 1,500 solid books." The Agbims say this type of focus has helped bring them closer to God. "You are not a monk," says Silas. "It is in the workplace that God expects you to show him your skills, to do your bit and serve him." —***By Carolina A. Miranda. Reported by Sean Scully***

The Evolution of a Religious Force

1902

José María Escrivá is born to a middle-class family in the Spanish region of Aragon; he later changes his name to Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer.

1928

Escrivá, now a priest living in Madrid, has a vision in which "the Lord willed that Opus Dei might come to be" and founds the organization to help laypeople find sanctity in ordinary work and life.

1939

Escrivá publishes *The Way*, a book of 999 spiritual maxims.

1949

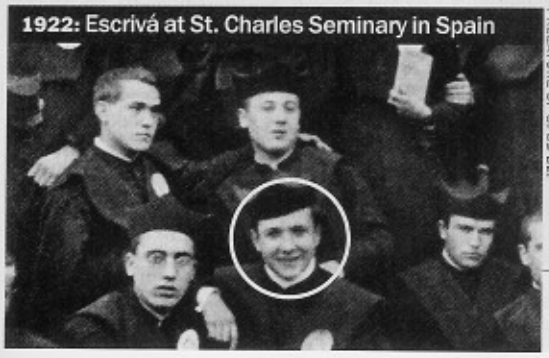
Opus Dei arrives in the U.S.; the organization also establishes operations in Mexico—its first in Latin America.

1962

Vatican II opens, sharing Escrivá's emphasis on lay activism but not his conservatism.

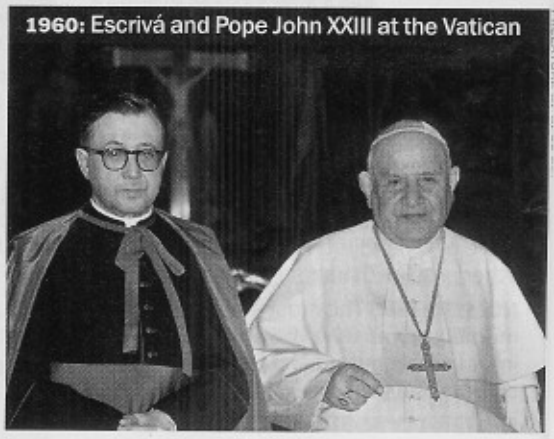
1975

Escrivá dies; Alvaro del Portillo, a close associate, is elected his successor.



1922: Escrivá at St. Charles Seminary in Spain

PRELATURE OF OPUS DEI



1960: Escrivá and Pope John XXIII at the Vatican

ERIKA LARSEN—REDUX FOR TIME

gave her "an underlying stream of peace and joy." Members bring a pious concentration to jobs that might otherwise be done less ethically or carefully. Heil, the Columbia student, says Opus "helps your whole life melt into this 24/7 conversation with God."

HOW SECRETIVE IS OPUS?

FOR ALL ITS UNIQUENESS IN MISSION AND structure, Opus Dei is best known for being secretive. It has a special set of greetings: *"Pax"* and *"In aeternum"* ("Peace" and "In eternity"). Its 1950 constitution barred members from revealing their membership without permission from the director of their center. In 1982 a new document repudiated "secrecy or clandestine activity," and Bohlin, the U.S. vicar, claims that the continuing impression is a misunderstanding based again on decentralization. "People [get Opus training] and go back to where they were," he says. "So we never march in a parade as a group because we don't form a group. And when people don't see us marching, they say, 'They must be secret.'"

Yet Opus will still not identify its members, and many prefer not to identify themselves. In England, in late 2004, the Labour government's Education Secretary, Ruth Kelly, went months before confirming she had received "spiritual support" from Opus. (Her exact status remains unclear.) Nor, as Allen shows in his book, will Opus formally own up to many of its institutions. Its U.S. schools tend to go by bland names like the Heights or Northridge Prep. For years, he reports, the 17-story U.S. headquarters in New York, finished in 2001, lacked an identifying street-level sign. Allen counts 15 universities, seven hospitals, 11 business schools and 36 primary and secondary schools around the world as what Opus calls "corporate works," as opposed to personal deeds. It is justly proud of 97 vocational-technical schools worldwide, which deflate the myth that Opus serves only the rich. But very few of the schools and hospitals are legally owned by Opus, which admits only to providing "doctrinal and spiritual formation." It is a tribute to the persistence of Allen and his financial expert, Joseph Harris, that they determined that at least in the U.S., Opus proper enjoys a minimum of "dual control" over them by placing members on their boards.

HOW RICH IS IT?

THE NORMAL ASSUMPTION ABOUT SUCH indirectness would be that the group is

1982

Pope John Paul II gives Opus Dei the status of personal prelature.

1994

Del Portillo dies and is replaced by Javier Echevarría, the current Opus Dei head.

2001

FBI agent Robert Hanssen is arrested for selling secrets to Moscow.

PAOLO COCCO—REUTERS

The ensuing media scrutiny introduces many outsiders to Opus Dei when it is revealed that Hanssen was a supernumerary member and had confessed his misdeeds to an Opus Dei priest.

2002

Pope John Paul II, above, canonizes Escrivá just 26 years after his death, describing him as "the saint of ordinary life."

2003

The Da Vinci Code, a thriller by Dan Brown featuring a murderous villain who is a member of Opus Dei, is published.

May 2006

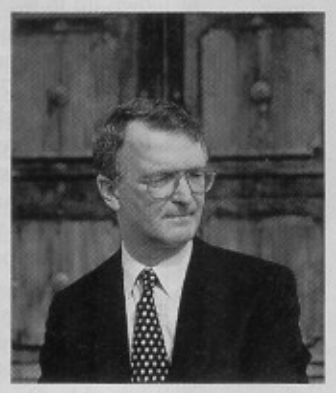
The scheduled month of release for the book's film version. Directed by Ron Howard, it stars Tom Hanks and Audrey Tautou, with Paul Bettany, right, as the assassin.

COLUMBIA PICTURES—EVERETT COLLECTION

DENNIS DUBRO

Disenchanted by Blind Obedience

Dennis Dubro strives to bring the principles of his spiritual beliefs to his job as an engineer in the nuclear division of a utility company in Fremont, Calif. He begins and ends each day with quiet prayer. Both are practices he developed in his 17 years as a member of Opus Dei. But Dubro, now 55, left the organization almost 20 years ago, disillusioned by the rigid obedience it demanded of its members.



After growing close to the organization while he was a student at M.I.T., he took the major step of becoming a numerary—a member who lives in an Opus Dei center—in 1974. That year Opus dispatched him to Sydney, Australia, to help run the finances at a men's dormitory. What he saw when he arrived there shocked him. "The accounts were in complete chaos," he recalls. "We didn't know how much was in the bank. There was money missing. Some account balances were off by hundreds of percents."

He took the problem to his spiritual director, who was also his boss, and was told not to worry. But as accounting irregularities kept surfacing, Dubro continued to raise the issue with the director and eventually took the matter up with one of the visiting inspectors who oversee local Opus operations. "I sat with him for an hour," says Dubro. "He said, 'These things don't happen in Opus Dei.' Then he asked how my spiritual life was going." (A spokesman for Opus Dei says he is not familiar with the details of this case but that "nobody was trying to cheat anyone.")

Dubro eventually grew frustrated with the assumption that questioning the organization was the same as questioning God's will and that leaving Opus would result in eternal damnation. He says he felt constantly pressured to recruit new members. He began to speak openly about his grievances and within a couple of years was asked to move out of the center. He left the group in 1987. "There is no ability to complain," he says. "It's absolute control, absolute obedience."

—By Carolina A. Miranda

ANNE HAMERSKY FOR TIME

hiding something, and filthy lucre is a staple of the Opus myth. Two rumors about its popularity with John Paul were that it funded the Solidarity trade union and helped bail out the Vatican bank after its 1982 scandal. Poverty is demonstrably not one of Opus' vows. It has a reputation for cultivating the rich or those soon to be, at both élite colleges and its own institutions. (In Latin America many in the church feel that Opus priests served once ascendant oligarchs over the masses.) Even in the inner city, Opus is unabashedly less interested in identifying with the poor than turning them into the middle class. Bohlin jokingly distinguishes his members from "some Franciscans with holes in their shoes, driving a crummy car because of their sense of the spirit of poverty."

On the basis of their study of IRS filings, Allen and Harris found $344.4 million in Opus assets in the U.S. and roughly estimate a global total of $2.8 billion. If correct, that sum approximates Duke University's endowment, yet is hardly Vatican bailout money. But those figures are only part of the picture. Opus members and its sympathizers, known as "cooperators," can be very generous, and their funds hard to track. Allen's research suggests that a most likely unexpected $60 million gift (a hefty portion of its total U.S. assets) financed much of the Manhattan building. Longlea, the group's Washington-area mansion, was donated by a couple who had just bought it for $7.4 million. Father Michael Barrett, an Opus Dei priest who pastors a chapel in Houston, recently raised $4.3 million for a new building and says, "I can assure you that cooperators and supernumeraries have given at the $100,000 level." That largesse, credited officially to the Galveston-Houston archdiocese, would not show up even on Allen's scrupulous balance sheet. Nor would similar Opus-generated funds.

HOW MUCH POWER DOES IT HAVE?

SOME HAVE SAID THAT OPUS' TRUE SECRET IS its clout in international politics. Poland's new conservative regime includes an Opus minister and several Opus officials, according to one of the group's Warsaw directors; membership there is rumored to be a political stepping-stone. In Peru, Juan Luis Cardinal Cipriani, the church's first openly Opus Dei Cardinal, was seen as having sanctioned antiterrorist excesses by the regime of former President Alberto Fujimori; he scoffed at the accusations, writing that most human-rights groups were "fronts for Marxist and Maoist political movements."

For years, Catholics in Washington have kept informal count of possible high-profile Opus people, including Justice Antonin Scalia and almost-Justice Robert Bork, Senators Rick Santorum and Sam Brownback, columnist Robert Novak and former FBI head Louis Freeh. The tally was not totally arbitrary: Freeh's child went to an Opus Dei school, and his brother was a numerary for a while; Scalia's wife has attended Opus events, and the Justice is close to an Opus priest; and Brownback, Bork and Novak converted to Catholicism under one's wing. Several have denied the rumors ("I can't stress enough that he is not a member," says Santorum's communications chief). But a bonus of Opus' new candor campaign is that it now states freely that not one of the powerful Washingtonians belongs.

The more complicated question is what influence Opus Dei exerts on nonmembers. Says Bohlin: "We generally avoid talking about anything political, so as not to come down on one side or the other." Then he pauses. "But when you're talking about abortion, that's not a political issue. That's a Catholic issue," he says. "There are certain issues that we take a clear stand with the church on, and many of them are hot-button issues." Of course, you don't have to be Opus to oppose abortion, euthanasia or gay marriage. But the prelature, with an office on the capital's lobbyist-laden K Street, can act as a kind of validator to a broader spectrum of traditionalists. Scott Appleby, a Catholic history expert at Notre Dame, estimates that through programs for nonmembers and the articulate piety of its members, Opus Dei informs "about a million conservative Catholics." That's just 1.5% of the 67 million Catholics nationally, but it's a trove of motivated voters a politician can love, and may explain why Santorum has spoken at Opus events, in one case quoting Escrivá: " 'Have you ever bothered to think how absurd it is

to leave one's Catholicism aside on entering a professional association [or] Congress, as if you were checking your hat at the door?'"

DO MEMBERS REALLY WHIP THEMSELVES?

THE MAN DOING PENANCE ADVISED HIS associate to cover his head with a blanket; but the observer could not stop his ears. "Soon," said the witness, "I began to hear the forceful blows of his discipline ... there were more than a thousand terrible blows, precisely timed. The floor was covered in blood." That is not an early *Da Vinci Code* draft. It is a description of Opus Dei founder Escrivá's routine by his eventual successor, quoted in a biography of Escrivá. Escrivá emphasized that others should not emulate his ferocity. But numeraries are expected, although not compelled, to wear a cilice, a small chain with inward-pointing spikes, around the upper thigh for two hours each day, and to flail themselves briefly weekly, with a small rope whip called a discipline.

With rare exceptions, even angry defectors don't cite self-mortification, as it's known, as their deal killer. Lucy, a former numerary assistant *(see box, following page)*, told TIME it was "nothing. It's not like *The Da Vinci Code*." Catholic laity and luminaries, including Mother Teresa, have used it to identify with Christ's—and the world's—agony. San Antonio Archbishop José Gomez, an Opus member, notes self-mortification's tie to Opus' roots: "In the Hispanic culture," he says, "you look at the crucifixes, and they have a lot of blood. We are more used to sacrifice in the sense of physical suffering."

WHAT ABOUT RUMORS OF MIND CONTROL?

SELF-MORTIFICATION RESONATES WITH CRITics because, as Allen points out, it provides a metaphor for what they see as an "inhumane approach within Opus Dei, which demands a kind of dominance over its members, body and soul." Unnerving stories have been passed by ex-numeraries to journalists or posted to the anti-Opus website *odan.org*. Many involve charges of deceptive recruiting, with prospective members unaware that the events they are invited to are Opus', of numeraries' realizing only belatedly that Opus expects them to sign away their paycheck and curtail relations with their families. The music they play and the publications they read are allegedly controlled, and they must report their own and others' deviations as part of a system of "fraternal correction." Center directors are portrayed as little dictators. Complaining to local bishops is futile because of Opus' semi-independent status. The critics claim that when the numeraries try to leave, they are threatened with damnation. Experts who have helped extract the disaffected have likened center life to a cult. And Martin, the *America* editor, contends that he gets "dozens" of calls yearly from parents saying the group has estranged or brainwashed their numerary children.

Opus responds that those who leave are a small minority, and Allen describes the mood around the many centers he visited as cheerful. Bohlin dismisses charges that prospective members are unaware of what to expect, pointing out that all go through an 18-month preparatory process. He says that in a group as loosely knit as he claims Opus to be, "you can't keep all the people happy all the time; you can't keep people from making mistakes." And he says the organization has mellowed. "I was running a center as a 25-year-old," Bohlin, now 51, notes. "At this point, we hopefully have more mature people. A green organization is different from one with more experience." To those who have been hurt, he says, "the only thing we can do is try to apologize and hope people understand, and you move on with your life."

HEATHER CUTHRELL

Living Out Her Faith Every Day

Growing up in a family of religious nomads who migrated from church to church, Heather Cuthrell says she yearned for a deeper connection to religion from the time she was 10 and converted to Catholicism when she was 16. "It was because of the tradition and the history and the idea that it was the only [faith] we could follow back all the way to the Apostles," she says.

While attending college in Houston, she met her future husband Jim Cuthrell at a local parish. He often participated in Opus Dei events, and it was through him that Heather became familiar with the organization. Its central tenet that people should find sanctity in their everyday lives resonated with her. "I grew up my whole life where you do whatever you want during the week, and then on Sunday you're a Christian," she explains. "A lot of people don't live their faith every day. But with Opus Dei, you don't compartmentalize. You try to live your virtues." In the early 1990s, Heather and Jim joined as supernumeraries, members who live in their homes rather than in Opus Dei residences.

Some family members were worried that the couple was getting involved with a cult. But Heather says they were reassured after reading pamphlets on the organization's practices. "People form these negative opinions because they don't have the right information," she says. Now married for 15 years and living in Long Beach, Calif., with Jim and their two daughters, Heather, 39, says she appreciates the structure that Opus Dei gives her life. She sees setting aside at least an hour a day for prayer as a blessing, not a burden. "I have much more calm because I know God has a hand in whatever happens," she says. "I am not as uptight about things." The result, she feels, is that Opus Dei has helped her be a better mother and wife. ***—By Carolina A. Miranda. Reported by Sean Scully***

CHERYL HIMMELSTEIN FOR TIME

"LUCY"

Broken by the Demands

What began as a part-time kitchen job at an Opus Dei retreat in Pembroke, Mass., became a 20-year career for a woman we'll call Lucy. (She recently left the group and asks that her real name not be used.) Just 16 at the time she started working there, Lucy not only liked her co-workers but appreciated their spirituality as well. After graduating from high school in 1985, she attended Lexington College in Chicago, an Opus Dei–affiliated school for women interested in hospitality professions. That fall, without telling her parents, she joined the organization as a numerary assistant.

The assistants are the female domestic crews that serve meals, do laundry and clean at Opus Dei facilities. "It's like working at a hotel," says Lucy, except that the job requires daily prayer, daily penance and lifelong celibacy. The work meant 12-hour days, six or seven days a week at Opus Dei centers from San Francisco to Boston, and Lucy says her minimum-wage salary was turned over to the organization. She found the stringent regulation of her life incredibly grueling. "You had to ask permission to do everything," she recalls. "If you wanted to go out with a friend, watch TV or listen to the radio. I got so fed up."

Her time with her tight-knit family was heavily restricted. When visiting relatives, she had to stay at the local Opus Dei center instead of at home. In 2000 Lucy was told she could not attend her sister's wedding because the ceremony would not be Catholic. "My sister didn't talk to me for two years," Lucy says. It took five more years, however, before she decided to leave Opus Dei last April. (The group's U.S. vicar has said such dissatisfaction and complaints, while unfortunate, are unavoidable in large organizations. "You can't keep [directors] from making mistakes.")

Now 39, Lucy lives with an old friend in Arkansas and has happily renewed relations with her family. She revels in simple things—like watching *Star Wars*—without having to ask permission. But her new life has been difficult. She has no savings and no real résumé. She works as a receptionist, earning $6.75 an hour. Disillusioned by her Opus Dei experience, she no longer attends Mass at all.

—By Carolina A. Miranda. With reporting by Sean Scully

ALLISON V. SMITH FOR TIME

WHAT IS ITS FUTURE?

PRIOR TO LAST YEAR'S PAPAL ELECTION, rumor held that Opus might end up brokering the conclave, but it turned out Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger did not need a broker. And the new Pope may be less concerned with aiding Opus than with strengthening the church's hierarchy. Nonetheless, Opus' second in command, Fernando Ocáriz, worked closely with Ratzinger on one of his last great conservative gestures as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Dominus Jesus*, a reassertion of the primacy of Catholicism over other religions. Other members are "consultors" to that key office, and Opus' canon lawyers saturate Rome. Asserts John Navone, a Jesuit theologian at Gregorian University: "They're in the forefront of the Vatican."

Opus' future in the U.S. is more complicated. Recently, on the 16th floor of the New York headquarters, 40 men did a guided contemplation. Two-thirds were visitors, some "meeting the Work" for the first time. While they sat, eyes closed, an Opus member intoned questions for them to ponder. "Do I realize that Christian life means finding and following Christ closely, no matter what the cost?" he asked: "Am I waging a generous inner struggle?" "Do I find in my work many opportunities for small sacrifices?" "Do I restrain my curiosity?"

That last one is a particularly telling query. Restraint of curiosity is not a virtue much trumpeted in the West today. That may help explain both why Opus' membership levels appear to have remained static in the U.S. over the past few decades and, perhaps, why it has attracted so much negative energy. "I don't believe Opus Dei is either a [cult] or a mafia or a cabal," a senior prelate of another religious community in Rome told TIME. It is just that "their approach is preconciliar. They originated prior to the Second Vatican Council, and they don't want to dialogue with society as they find it." That would not describe the majority of self-identifying American Catholics, who are distinctly postconciliar, with more than 75% opposing the birth-control ban. Their sympathy for Opus Dei might be limited. Some might even feel hostile toward it: church liberals, once riding high, have understood for decades that Rome does not incline their way. They feel abandoned, says Allen, "and whenever you feel that way, there's a natural desire to find someone to blame."

If that is the case—if much of the negative feeling regarding Opus at this point is displaced anger over the direction of the church—then *The Da Vinci Code* may be the best fate that could befall it. The movie will not deter Opus' usual constituency—conservative Catholics do not look to Ron Howard for guidance. But by forcing Opus into greater transparency, the film could aid it: if the organization is as harmless and "mature" as Bohlin contends, then such exposure could bring in a bumper crop of devotees—with perhaps even more to come if, as seems likely, American Catholicism becomes both more Hispanic and more conservative.

That is the kind of outcome Julian Cardinal Herranz, Opus' ranking Vatican official, expects. Long ago, he says, when he was editing a university newspaper, someone submitted a story claiming that Opus Dei was part of a worldwide conspiracy. Fascinated, Herranz began talking to Opus members, eventually becoming one himself. "That article I read was fiction," he says. "And now I'm here. I became a priest, I came to Rome, I became a bishop, and now a Cardinal. All because I read a fictional story about Opus Dei." ***—With reporting by Sean Scully and Carolina A. Miranda/New York, Jordan Bonfante and Jeff Israely/Vatican City, Amanda Bower/San Francisco, Lucien Chauvin/Lima, Mark Thompson/Washington and Dolly Mascareñas/Mexico City***