

# A Coming-Out Party in Rome

## Opus Dei prepares to stand by its man

BY KENNETH L. WOODWARD

**A**t a televised ceremony in St. Peter's Square this Sunday, Pope John Paul II will beatify Josephine Bakhita, an African slave who became a holy nun. But who will notice? On the same program is the beatification of Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, and Opus Dei, the secretive international organization he founded, has marshaled a record crowd of 150,000—including 200 bishops—for the event. All of Rome's 60,000 hotel beds were booked months ago and two "floating hotels" have been chartered to ferry well-heeled members of Opus Dei ("The Work



Beatification and public relations: Escrivá, John Paul II consecrating Portillo a bishop

of God") from Spain, Escrivá's homeland.

Rome hasn't seen such a spectacle since the pope's own inaugural. Although Escrivá, who died in 1975, is still one step away from canonization—official sainthood—Opus Dei has enlisted the Vatican's leading cardinals to preside at 23 masses, thanking God in 12 languages for the life and example of Escrivá. Altogether, the five-day extravaganza will confirm what most people at the Vatican have long suspected: Opus Dei, under John Paul, has become the most

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influential—and feared—organization in the central administration of the Roman Catholic Church.

It wasn't always that way. Under Pope Paul VI, Opus Dei was suspect. Vatican documents show that Paul worried that Opus Dei priests in the Vatican were leaking confidential decisions to Escrivá. Opus



Dei has blossomed under John Paul. In 1982 he awarded Opus Dei unique status as a "personal prelature," which means that its 75,000 clerical and lay members take spiritual direction from their own prelate in Rome, Bishop Alvaro del Portillo, and not—like other Catholics—from their local bishop. John Paul II has also increased the number of Opus Dei bishops to 13 (there were only four before, all in Latin America) and granted Opus its own pontifical "atheneum" in Rome, despite objections from the rectors of the church's established pontifical universities.

But Opus Dei's real power is inside the

Vatican bureaucracy, where it has replaced the Jesuits in political—though not intellectual—leverage. Several ranking cardinals and at least one of the pope's personal secretaries, Father Stanislaw Dziwisz, from Cracow, are either card-carrying "cooperators" or, like the pope himself, strong sympathizers of Opus Dei. Opus Dei is well represented in the Vatican's public-relations apparatus. John Paul II's press spokesman is a member. So are the officials who supervise the media-conscious pope's liaisons with television.

Getting its founder proclaimed a "Blessed" is undoubtedly Opus Dei's greatest public-relations coup—one it could not have accomplished so shortly after his death

without the compliance of cooperators inside the Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints. Officials of the congregation not only gave the cause top priority but, as the official *positio* on Escrivá shows, they also bent their rules to exclude damaging evidence about Escrivá's character and commitment to the church.

**'Dishonor':** For instance, the *positio* claims that the volatile Escrivá lost his temper only once, yet many former members who knew him well insist he was routinely abusive of anyone suspected of being an enemy of Opus Dei, including Pope John XXIII and Paul VI. According to "Beyond the Threshold," a memoir published recently in Spain by María del Carmen Tapia, who worked closely with Escrivá, the founder called her a "whore" when he dismissed her after 18 years in the organization and warned that if she ever spoke ill of Opus Dei, "I, Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, who has the world press in my hands... will publicly dishonor you." A Vatican source said, contrary to established procedures, no published writings critical of Escrivá were included in the documents given to the judges of his cause; nor did the congregation investigate Escrivá's celebrated conflicts with the Jesuits, reports of his pro-fascist leanings and Opus Dei's involvement with the Franco government. Incredibly, 40 percent of the testimony came from just two men: Portillo and his assistant, Father Javier Echevarría.

In two recent press conferences, Opus Dei officials have denied all criticism of Escrivá's cause. And John Paul has not publicly wavered. By lining up so closely with the sitting pope, Opus Dei may be shunned by his successor. The organization would do well to recall the Biblical injunction: put your faith not in princes.

With CHRISTOPHER DICKEY in Barcelona and PIA HINCKLE in Rome