

Opus Dei and John Paul II

A Profoundly Rightwing Pope

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The predominant perception of John Paul II, as extensively reproduced in most of the Western media, is that he was very conservative ("traditional" is the term widely used) in religious subjects but progressive in social matters, as evidenced by his defense of the poor and his concern for human and social rights. His key ideological role in the demise of the Soviet Union is put forward as further proof of his commitment to liberty and democracy. John Paul's support for the Polish trade union *Solidarnosc*, his numerous speeches in support of the poor and of those left behind by capitalism or globalization, and his frequent calls for human solidarity not to mention his opposition to the invasion of Iraq by U.S. forces all are presented as examples of his progressiveness in the social arena.

In this perception of Pope John Paul II, some critical elements are forgotten. Let's detail them. He was groomed for the Papacy, long before he was elected Pope, by the ultra-right-wing sect Opus Dei. This secret organization was founded by Monsignor Escrivá, a Spanish priest who was formerly a private confessor to General Franco, organizing spiritual meetings for the Spanish fascist leadership. Opus Dei chose John Paul as the candidate for Pope very early in his career, when he was bishop of Krakow. His conservatism and anti-communism were very attractive to this sect.

John Paul traveled extensively at that time on trips organized and funded by Opus Dei, developing a very close working relationship with the sect. Opus Dei was the organization that developed the strategy to make him the Pope, assisted by the bishop of Munich, Joseph Ratzinger; the U.S. cardinals close to Opus Dei, Joseph Krol and Patrick Cody; and a cardinal then close to Opus Dei, Cardinal Franz König from Vienna (who later distanced himself from Opus Dei and from the Pope). The center of operations for this campaign was Villa Tevere, the Opus Dei headquarters in Rome.

Immediately after his election as Pope, John Paul designated Opus Dei as a special order directly accountable to him, not to the bishops. He surrounded himself with members of the order, the most visible being Navarro-Valls, an Opus Dei journalist who had worked for *Abc*, an ultra-conservative Spanish paper that had been supportive of the Franco regime. Navarro-Valls is well-known for selecting journalists to cover the Pope's international visits who would report on them favorably. He constantly vetoed critical voices, such as that of Domenico del Rio of the Italian paper *La Repubblica*.

The Pope later named another Opus Dei member, Angelo Sodano, as Secretary of State of the Vatican. Sodano had been the Vatican's ambassador in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship, becoming a close friend and advisor to the dictator. He was responsible for the Pope's visit to the Pinochet dictatorship in 1987. During this visit, the Pope *never called publicly for liberty or democracy in Chile*. By contrast, when John Paul visited Cuba he was publicly critical of the Cuban regime. But he remained silent when he visited Pinochet. Later, when Pinochet was detained in London (awaiting extradition to Spain at the request of the Spanish Judge Baltazar Garzon), the Vatican, under Sodano's influence, asked the British Government to let Pinochet return to Chile. This same Sodano had referred to liberation theologian Leonardo Boff one of the most popular priests in Latin America as "a traitor to the Church, the Judas of Christ." Under Pope John Paul II, the founder of Opus Dei was made a saint just twenty seven years after his death (one of the fastest such processes ever). Meanwhile, Pope John XXIII and Bishop Romero, assassinated in El Salvador because of his support for the poor of that country, have been waiting in line for sainthood for a much longer time.

Opus Dei and its Pope were profoundly hostile to liberation theology. John Paul condemned it at the II Latin American Conference, presided over by Opus Dei member Monsignor Alfonso Lopez Trujillo, Secretary General and later president of that Conference. John Paul also was displeased with the Jesuits who had become increasingly concerned about identification of the Church with the strong oligarchical regimes of Latin America. He changed the leadership of the order, appointing very conservative priests as its new leadership. As reported by the ex-Jesuit Luis de Sebastian in the Spanish Daily *El Periodico* (5 April 2005), the Pope received periodical reports from U.S. CIA Director William Casey (a Roman Catholic) on the "distressing" Jesuit movements in Latin America.

John Paul's speeches on the poor were highly generic and sanctimonious, humanistic in character, without ever touching on the cause of poverty. As the Brazilian Bishop Helder Camara once said, "When I called for the role of the Church to be with the poor, I am called a saint; when I'm asked to do something about the causes of poverty, I am called a communist."

John Paul was profoundly political, always on the side of the powerful in Latin America and in Spain. He never touched on the political causes of poverty, he marginalized and ostracized the mass religious movements in Latin America that called for major social reforms in favor of the poor, and (with Cardinal Ratzinger, the guardian of the Church orthodoxy) he condemned such movements, ordering their leading figures Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, Jon Sobrino, and others to remain silent. Bishop Romero wrote in his personal notes that, when he denounced the brutal repression carried out by the fascist dictatorship in El Salvador, the Pope reprimanded him for not being sufficiently balanced in his criticisms of the Salvadorian dictatorship, whom John Paul referred to as the legitimate government of El Salvador.

In Spain, John Paul was political to an extreme. He was openly supportive of the post-Francoist party, the Popular Party (whose founder is Fraga Iribarne, ex-Minister of the Interior of the Franco fascist regime) and just a few months before his death he gave a speech against the Zapatero government that was actually written by the proPopular Party leadership of the Spanish Church. Although he opposed the invasion of Iraq and the bombing of the Iraqi population, he never condemned the Franco regime (which the Spanish Church supported), nor did he ever condemn the bombing of Spain's civilian population by the Franco Air Force, with the help of German Nazi bombers. When he was asked to condemn the bombing of Spanish cities by the Church-supported fascist forces of Spain, he declined to do so.

Rather than pushing a social agenda worldwide, Pope John Paul II became a major obstacle to such an agenda by making conservative issues (anti-abortion, anti-contraception, anti-homosexuality, and others) rather than social ones the center of political debate. The evolution of the U.S. political debate among Catholics is an example of this. In the past, Catholics in the U.S. voted Democrat more than Republican, but this is no longer the case. In the 2004 presidential election, more Catholics voted for Bush (52%) than for Kerry (47%), and they indicated that the primary reason they supported Bush was the "values" issue.

Based on all this evidence, it is remarkable that John Paul II, Opus Dei's Pope, can be considered a progressive icon.

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