

Movie on Opus Dei founder sure to set Catholic tongues wagging

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 8, 2011 | NCR Today

Six years ago I published a book on Opus Dei, attempting to sort myth from reality about the controversial Catholic group. One question I hoped to answer was this: What was it about St. Josemar'a Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, which inspired hundreds of thousands of people around the world, far beyond the group's relatively meager membership of roughly 90,000?

I presumed that all those people weren't drawn to Opus Dei's reputation for being a fanatical right-wing cabal seeking to hijack financial markets, topple governments, and restore the church militant. So beyond that black legend, what was it about Escrivá that people found compelling?

This spring, a new movie, which is sure to set Catholic tongues wagging, tries to offer a dramatic answer to that question: *'There Be Dragons,'* written and directed by acclaimed director Roland Joffé, whose previous works include classics such as *'The Mission'* and *'The Killing Fields.'*

Depending on how things break, *'There Be Dragons'* could stir the same sort of ferment as Mel Gibson's *'The Passion'* — fierce devotion in some quarters, and strong backlash in others.

The movie features some major Hollywood talent, such as Derek Jacobi and Wes Bentley (of *'American Beauty'* fame), as well as Brazilian soap opera star Rodrigo Santoro. The role of Escrivá is played by English actor Charlie Cox.

'There Be Dragons' premieres in Spain on March 25, and in the United States on May 6. Last Friday, I was part of a small group invited to see an advance screening of the movie in Rome.

From a journalistic point of view, it's tempting to style *'There Be Dragons'* as a sort of anti-*Da Vinci Code* — a pop culture portrayal of Opus Dei, in the person of the group's founder, which makes the group seem as heroic and sympathetic as Dan Brown's potboiler, and the subsequent film, made it appear weird and menacing.

In the abstract, if you didn't know anything about Opus Dei and Escrivá, you would probably experience *'There Be Dragons'* as a powerful story of forgiveness and reconciliation. Without giving too much of the plot away, it opens with a journalist at odds with his father being assigned to cover Escrivá's canonization in 2002, and he soon discovers his father had a hidden, and devastating, tie to the saint. The story veers between the present and flashbacks to the Spanish Civil War, when Escrivá drew together his first band of followers.

Naturally, however, lots of people do know something about Opus Dei, and it will be fascinating to see how that colors their approach to the film.

Some may dismiss *'There Be Dragons'* as Opus Dei agit-prop, a well-heeled effort to whitewash the controversy around Escrivá. There's no doubt that Opus Dei's fingerprints are all over the project: Although Joffé himself is a leftist who describes himself as a "wobbly agnostic," two co-producers are Spanish Opus Dei members, and an American Opus Dei priest, Fr. John Wauck, served as an adviser. The movie cost \$36 million

to make, and a good chunk of that money came from Opus Dei investors.

In that light, it will be fascinating to track whether the inevitable controversy around the movie serves to get people in the door, thereby boosting its commercial success, or whether it alienates people who might otherwise find it inspiring.

As a footnote, here's something worth thinking about. Joffé has now made films lionizing members of two groups historically regarded as sort of the matter and anti-matter of the Catholic universe: The Jesuits and Opus Dei. It's ironic ? and, perhaps, not a little bit revealing ? that it has taken a ?wobbly agnostic,? rather than a Catholic, to make movies with something positive to say about both.

The film's official website is here: <http://www.therebedragonsfilm.com/>

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