STUDIA ET DOCUMENTA

RIVISTA DELL'ISTITUTO STORICO SAN JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ

VOL. 20 – 2026

ISTITUTO STORICO SAN JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ – ROMA

Studia et Documenta
Rivista dell'Istituto Storico San Josemaría Escrivá
Pubblicazione annuale
Volume 20, 2026

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Recensioni

Gore, Gareth, *Opus. The Cult of Dark Money, Human Trafficking, and Right-Wing Conspiracy inside the Catholic Church*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2024, 447 pp.

The book's more than 100 pages of endnotes have prompted several reviewers in the popular press to characterize it as "well documented," "deeply researched," or "solidly researched." However, an abundance of notes does not guarantee that a book presents an accurate picture. That depends on the quality of the sources and the author's methodology in utilizing them. This review examines not primarily the content of the book but rather the caliber of sources cited and the manner in which the material is employed. It concludes that *Opus* is not a reliable source of information about Opus Dei.

Unsourced Allegations

No author can be expected to provide a citation for every statement. It is not a methodological deficiency to presuppose well-established and generally-accepted facts. In *Opus,* however, numerous unsourced statements appear to be not well-established facts but outright fabrications. Many of these statements are relatively inconsequential in isolation but collectively they engender significant the book's overall credibility. Consider several illustrative examples: Gore asserts that Opus Dei's headquarters in New York lack signage indicating that the building houses its them (p. 13). In reality, a bronze plaque a few feet from the entrance identifies among the occupants the "Prelature of Opus Dei in the United States." He contends that married members tithe (p. 274). This claim is false. Although many married members of Opus Dei contribute generously to support its apostolic undertakings, no specific contribution amount or percentage of income is required or suggested. Gore further maintains that at Opus Dei headquarters in Rome, "the life of Saint Josemaria is commemorated in a solemn ceremony every day at noon" (p. 14). In actuality, while Mass is celebrated daily at noon in Opus Dei's Prelatic Church, the liturgical texts employed are identical to those utilized in churches throughout Rome and contain no specific references to St. Josemaria. No ceremony honoring the Founder, solemn

ISSN 1970-4879

or otherwise, occurs at noon or at any other time except on Saint Josemaria's feast day (June 26th) and a few anniversaries of significant events in his life.

Anonymous Sources

Although the utilization of anonymous sources has become an established practice in contemporary journalism, professional standards dictate that such sources should be employed sparingly and cautiously. Gore's dependence on anonymous sources is far from sparing: 18 of the 97 citations in Chapter 1 reference anonymous informants. In at least one instance, he employs two levels of anonymity. In this particular case, the text (p. 284-285) purports to report what an anonymous lawyer allegedly communicated to a named lawyer regarding statements purportedly made by the Pope. The corresponding endnote, however, reveals that Gore's source is neither the identified lawyer nor his anonymous informant but rather a second anonymous individual "familiar with the meeting" between the anonymous source and the lawyer.

Gore's reliance on anonymous sources extends beyond incidental details to substantive claims. He alleges on the basis of an anonymous source, for instance, that the founder's successor attempted to conceal from the members that the Work's transformation into a personal prelature rendered their commitments legally non-binding (p. 145). In fact, the Work promptly informed all members that if they wished to continue as members, they needed to recommit themselves.

Gore asserts that Opus Dei priests engage in "widespread" violation of the seal of confession. (p. 192). He predicates this extremely serious accusation on the claim that a prominent conservative writer, Deal Hudson, severed relations with an Opus Dei priest, Fr. C. John McCloskey, upon discovering that Fr. McCloskey had breached the seal. Misconduct by a single priest, even if fully documented, would not constitute evidence of "widespread" violations of the seal by other Opus Dei priests. In this particular instance, moreover, the evidence against Fr. McCloskey is extremely thin and ultimately rests on an anonymous source. For the alleged rupture between Hudson and McCloskey, Gore relies on an article published in *the Boston Globe Magazine* that discusses their purported falling out. Gore neglects to mention that Hudson promptly published a response categorically denying any estrangement from McCloskey. Furthermore, the Boston Globe article makes no reference to any violation of the confessional seal as the precipitating factor. For this critical assertion, Gore relies exclusively upon an "interview with someone familiar with the situation."

This analysis is not meant to suggest that all the information Gore attributes to anonymous sources should be dismissed as factually incorrect. However, the extraordinary frequency with which he employs such sources raises significant concerns regarding his book's reliability.

Uncritical Use of Unreliable Sources

Gore consistently relies on sources whose credibility is questionable without appropriate scholarly caution. The most prominent among these is sociologist

Alberto Moncada, whom Gore references approximately forty times in the endnotes. Moncada was a longstanding member of Opus Dei who, following his departure, became a vociferous critic. He provided testimony against Escrivá's beatification before the tribunal that interviewed witnesses in Madrid. By that juncture, his antipathy toward the Work and its founder had reached such intensity that the Dominican cleric responsible for transmitting the collected testimony to Rome recommended excluding Moncada's deposition, on grounds that his "hatred" for Escrivá compromised its reliability. Nevertheless, Gore provides no indication to readers that Moncada might constitute less than an impartial observer.

Another principal source, Robert A. Hutchinson, is cited approximately 15 times. Readers might reasonably question Hutchinson's credibility if they knew that in his book In *the Tracks of the Yeti*, he unequivocally states that he knows the Yeti, commonly termed the abominable snowman, "is alive" because "I have seen his footprints." Gore, however, demonstrates no reservation in relying on his testimony.

An additional problematic source whose assertions Gore accepts without critical evaluation is Fr. Vladimir Felzmann, another former member of Opus Dei. Fr. Felzmann claims to have served as Escrivá's assistant and confidant, though no independent evidence suggests that he occupied any position beyond being one of approximately 100 Opus Dei members studying philosophy and theology in Rome during the 1960s. Fr. Felzmann constitutes Gore's sole source for an allegation that the founder's ultra-conservative ideology led him to become so disaffected with Vatican II's teachings that he journeyed to Greece to explore the possibility of withdrawing Opus Dei from the Roman Catholic Church and affiliating it with the Greek Orthodox Church. While Escrivá did indeed briefly visit Greece during the 1960s, no evidence beyond Felzmann's accusation suggests that he ever contemplated severing ties with the Roman Catholic Church. There is abundant evidenced that Escrivá was particularly devoted to the papacy. For instance, he spent his initial night in Rome contemplating the papal apartments in prayerful communion with the Pope. In his later years, he preached frequently about commitment and love for the Church. (Some of his homilies were subsequently published posthumously in a volume entitled *In Love with the Church*). The accusation that he considered breaking with Rome and joining the Orthodox Church strains credulity and is not supported by any source other than Fr. Felzmann. Gore, nonetheless, presents this improbable charge as an established historical fact.

Fr. Felzmann is also Gore's source for an allegation that Escrivá defended Hitler. Fr. Felzmann claims that Escrivá told him that Hitler did not exterminate six million Jews but rather "only four million" (pp. 71-72 and 156). Even cursory research reveals numerous accounts from Jewish individuals, including several rabbis, documenting cordial relations with Escrivá and other Opus Dei members. Even without such external refutation, it is hard to imagine how even a particularly stupid Hitler apologist might believe it advantageous to assert Hitler killed "only four million" Jews. While Escrivá has his detractors, none impugn his intellectual capacity.

Selective Quotation

Gore consistently omits information presented by Opus Dei in official statements or by authors who offer factual accounts divergent from his narrative. In several cases he goes considerably further by suppressing qualifying statements made by the very author he quotes. We saw example of this in reference to his allegation that priests of Opus Dei routinely violate the seal of confession. Another example involves his contention that the founder exhibited uncontrolled anger and temperamental volatility. For this charge, he relies on a book by a prominent former member, Maria Tapia. While Tapia does characterize Escrivá as having a volatile temper that he occasionally failed to restrain, in an Associated Press interview, she clarified that he struggled to maintain self-control and frequently apologized following lapses. She further stated in a declaration published by ANSA, Italy's preeminent news agency, that Escrivá's impending canonization represented "a source of joy" and that it would constitute a "serious error to use the information in my book to cast doubt on the sanctity of the founder of Opus Dei." She emphasized that "I never considered [his strong character] an impediment to his sanctity and subsequent canonization." None of these significant qualifying statements appear in *Opus*.

Interpretive Framework

Gore acknowledges that when commencing his research, he "knew next to nothing about the Church or about Opus Dei" (p. 6). This initial unfamiliarity need not have presented an impediment had the author undertaken serious investigation into members' spiritual lives, their conceptualization of the Work's nature, and the elements that render it attractive to the overwhelming majority of members who are neither affluent nor politically engaged. Unfortunately, he pays virtually no attention to these fundamental aspects.

These omissions appear to reflect a preconceived notion that Opus Dei members and particularly its leadership cannot be motivated by religious conviction so their only real goals must be financial gain and political influence. This unquestioned assumption leads Gore not only to disregard members' spiritual dimensions but to reinterpret any activities inconsistent with his premise. For example, he characterizes the substantial number of social centers and educational institutions established by Opus Dei members as mere façades designed to facilitate what he consistently portrays as recruitment or the pursuit of power and financial resources. A particularly egregious example is his description of The Heights, a private educational institution founded by Opus Dei members in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, as "an effective model for generating new recruits and profits" (p. 125). No author unencumbered by Gore's prejudices could seriously propose that private educational institutions are attractive investments, particularly in the United States where such institutions receive minimal governmental assistance and frequently struggle to maintain financial viability.

Gore's interpretive framework influences not only the substance of his presentation but also his lexical choices, which one American reviewer characterized as

"lurid." He appears determined to leave readers with a repellent impression of Opus Dei and its members. For instance, he describes the lives of members who reside in centers as governed by a "dystopian set of rules and regulations—an Orwellian blueprint for society laid down by the founder" (p. 10). He portrays the lives of the substantial majority of members who reside not in Opus Dei centers but in their private residences as subject to a "system of manipulation and control... enforced by a sprawling army of numeraries" (p. 66). He says that Alvaro del Portillo, whom Pope Francis beatified in 2014, "left behind an institution even more corrupt than the one he'd inherited. During his reign, he had further tightened the screws on the membership... and outright lied about the authority Opus Dei held over them. The poisoned chalice would now pass to the next prelate" (p. 168). This is hardly the language of an even-handed account.

Conclusion

Despite the book's extensive endnotes, neither the quality of the sources cited nor the author's utilization of his material suggest that *Opus* constitutes a well-documented, balanced presentation.

John F. Coverdale
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DOI: 10.48275/setd.20.2026.17

Janson, John Henry, *Coached by Josemaria Escriva. Lessons in Discipleship*, New York, Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2024, 104 pp.

Coached by Josemaria Escriva. Lesson in Discipleship is a new addition to the "Coached by the Saints" published by Scepter Publishers. The goal of these eight books, according to the publishers, is to "offer profound insights and practical lessons from the lives of the saints, helping you navigate the challenges of modern life with faith, courage, and joy." Each book in the series highlights one aspect of the saint which becomes the subject of the book: this book highlights St. Josemaria's lessons in discipleship. As Scepter explains, "In these pages, author Fr. John Henry Hanson explores the role of leader and coach that the "Saint of the Ordinary" lived while on earth and continues to live today…"

The idea of being a coach is highlighted on the very first page with a quote from *Friends of God*, n. 182, in which St. Josemaria speaks about "how an athlete's eyes light up with sight of the obstacles he has to overcome… how he conquers the difficulties." This book analyses 72 different quotes from seven different book written by St. Josemaria to show how he coaches one to strive to be a saint in one's ordinary daily life. St. Josemaria saw his role as the founder of Opus Dei to be a father to those who joined Opus Dei and those who came to its activities and he was always coaching his children as a father would in a natural way, given them guidance and encouraging them. As Fr. Janson points out, you see this father coaching in the