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# Evangelium Vitae Today

HOW CONSERVATIVE FORCES ARE USING THE 1995 PAPAL ENCYCLICAL TO RESHAPE PUBLIC POLICY IN LATIN AMERICA

By Juan Marco Vaggione



Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera of Mexico (L) gives a plate with an image representing the Holy Family to Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone during the VI World Meeting of Families in Mexico City, Jan. 16, 2009.

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**C**ONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC activists have historically played a central role in shaping public policy in most Latin American countries. In the last decade

or so, the manner in which these activists work has been transformed, pushed in large part by the Vatican. In large measure, this transformation has been developed to counter the successes that

women's rights and reproductive rights advocates have had in placing their demands on national and global public agendas. Far from retreating in the face of this onslaught, conservative religious activists have strategically adapted to the new context so as to continue influencing public policy and legislation. What's new is not the content of their beliefs, which continue to be strongly patriarchal and

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supportive of a very traditional social order, but rather the strategies and arguments they use.

The World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995) saw sexual and reproductive health issues become part of international human rights agendas. The conferences distilled years of activism and mobilization so that sexuality issues could enter the contemporary global language on human rights. As such, they were important moments in the development of these new forms of conservative Catholic activism since the legitimacy attached to sexual and reproductive rights required a new response. The old arguments and strategies were unlikely to continue to be effective. The primary purpose of this article is to consider these conferences as markers of a “new global grammar” to which the most dogmatic Catholic entities, particularly the Vatican, its representatives in the hierarchy and its colleagues like Opus Dei (see box), had to adapt and react. In so doing, they began to generate a new type of Catholic activism that continues to be strongly patriarchal and which also tries novel ways of influencing public discussions without becoming any more flexible with regard to the hierarchy’s dogma on sexuality.

#### ENCYCLICALS AS POLITICAL PROGRAM

Official hierarchal documents on the topics of family or sexuality are a combination of religious and political arguments. The boundaries are difficult to trace, but the encyclical “*Evangelium Vitae*” from March 1995 can be read as both a religious document that captures and reconstructs the official doctrine of the Catholic hierarchy with regard to issues such as abortion, and as a programmatic document that delineates the main political strategies proposed by the hierarchy for the new climate that was created by these international conferences. A central purpose of the encyclical was to reaffirm the official position of the hierarchy that abortion is both “serious and deplorable.” But

the encyclical also can be considered to be a political manifesto that laid out some of the key dimensions that constitute the new forms of Catholic activism pushed by the Vatican and which have had significant impact in regions like Latin America.

#### A “CULTURE OF DEATH”

A general theme of the encyclical, which permeates patriarchal Catholic activism, is to label the movement for sexual and reproductive health rights (never directly called that) as being part of a “culture of death.” The encyclical affirms that:



Pope John Paul II (L) and former Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet look on in Antofagasta, Chile during a papal visit there in this April 1987 file photo.

This situation, with its lights and shadows, ought to make us all fully aware that we are facing an enormous and dramatic clash between good and evil, death and life, the “culture of death” and the “culture of life.” We find ourselves not only “faced with” but necessarily “in the midst of” this conflict: we are all involved and we all share in it, with the inescapable responsibility of choosing to be unconditionally pro-life.

The political and legal demands of feminism and the movement for sexual diversity are considered—by the hierarchy—to respond to a cultural ethos encompassed in the term “death.” The creation of this dichotomy between life and death gener-

ates a level of virulence that makes it impossible for these new Catholic movements to form a broad-based consensus on policies on sexuality. Simply stated, this is because “*Evangelium Vitae*” is not discussing a system of rights; rather, life as a value is what is at issue. The campaign for sexual and reproductive rights becomes part of this “culture of death,” making it nonnegotiable. Not only is abortion resisted, but any legal change that achieves or makes a distinction between sexuality and reproduction is considered to be a cultural change that must also be resisted. Thus, groups that favor sexual and reproductive rights, particularly feminists and sexual diversity movements, are considered to be bearers of an ideology, which makes their demands lack any legitimacy.

#### THE “NGO-IFICATION” OF RELIGIOUS MATTERS

Another interesting directive that the encyclical makes is to Catholics in general to defend the “culture of life.” The encyclical maintains that “What is urgently called for is a general mobilization of consciences and a united ethical effort to activate a great campaign in support of life. All together, we must build a new culture of life....” Faced with the advance of feminism and those who support sexual diversity, the Vatican calls on believers to take an active political role, taking up a central theme that was important during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). What is new is the centrality of sexual and reproductive rights to conceptualizing the public role of the faithful. The results are seen in official documents and public speeches by representatives of the Vatican and other members of the hierarchy calling on the faithful to actively mobilize.

In accordance with this call, Pope John Paul II organized a series of meetings under the name of World Meeting of Families, an international opportunity to coordinate agendas antithetical to sexual and reproductive rights and attended by the most conservative Catholic leaders and faithful. The first of these meetings took place in October 1994 in Rome, with subse-

quent ones every three years in different countries. (The latest was in Mexico in 2009 and the next will be in Milan in 2012.) In the opening speech for the first meeting, Pope John Paul II referred explicitly to the Cairo conference: "...a certain tendency could be seen at the recent Cairo conference on population and development as well as in other meetings held in past months. There have also been some attempts in parliaments to change the meaning of family, depriving it of its natural reference to marriage. They have shown how necessary the steps taken by the Church have been to defend the family and its indispensable mission in society."

Among the various impacts of this type of call, the "NGO-ification" of conservative Catholic activism stands out. The most integrationist sectors of Catholicism organize by seeking recognition as nongovernmental organizations, and in this way are able to play an important role for the hierarchy. At local, national and supranational levels they intervene in discussions on sexuality and reproduction as self-proclaimed "prolife" or "profamily" NGOs that spearhead opposition to sexual and reproductive health and rights. This phenomenon, which may have originated in large measure from the *Roe v. Wade* decision in the US, spread as a global strategy behind and has had a significant impact on Latin American countries.

#### **EMERGENCY CONTRACEPTION AS AN ABORTIFACIENT**

Another strategy of conservative Catholic activism is to attack contraception as being part of the "culture of death." The 1995 encyclical takes this line, affirming:

The close connection which exists, in mentality, between the practice of contraception and that of abortion is becoming increasingly obvious. It is being demonstrated in an alarming way by the development of chemical products, intrauterine devices and vaccines which, distributed with the same ease as contraceptives, really act as abortifacients in the

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## Opus Dei

*This is an excerpt from a forthcoming publication from Catholics for Choice on Opus Dei—one of the organizations that epitomizes the strategies outlined in Juan Marco Vaggione's article.*

#### **TIMELINE**

- January 9, 1902—Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer is born in the town of Barbastro, Spain.
- October 2, 1928—Escrivá de Balaguer founds Opus Dei.
- February 14, 1930—Escrivá de Balaguer creates the women's branch of Opus Dei.
- February 14, 1943—The Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, the branch of Opus Dei for priests, is founded.
- October 17, 1952—The Universidad de Navarra is founded by Escrivá de Balaguer.
- June 26, 1975—Escrivá de Balaguer dies in Rome.
- February 2, 1978—The process of canonizing Escrivá de Balaguer begins.
- August 5, 1982—Pope John Paul II recognizes Opus Dei as a personal prelature.
- May 17, 1992—Beatification of Escrivá de Balaguer.
- April 20, 1994—Pope John Paul II names Javier Echevarría as Prelate of Opus Dei.
- October 6, 2002—Escrivá de Balaguer is canonized in Rome.

Opus Dei (Latin for "the Work of God") is one of the most conservative orders in the Catholic church. Founded in Spain, Opus Dei is especially influential in Latin America because of the relationships it has cultivated in political and business circles. Members and sympathizers of Opus Dei hold high-level positions in various governments and it is one of the main forces supporting conservative activities in the region. It vehemently opposes the promotion and provision of a wide range of sexual and reproductive health services. Opus Dei not only rejects the concept that sexual and reproductive rights are individual freedoms, but calls people to actively fight against these ideas, something which Opus Dei members do daily in many countries around the world.

In just the last decade, people tied to Opus Dei participated in two right-wing coups d'état in Latin America—in Venezuela in 2002 and in Honduras in 2009. In addition, some of the leading personalities on the Latin American right were educated in Opus Dei schools or have ties to it either as members or sympathizers. Opus Dei's participation in the business world has also been significant. There, many of its members tend to display a degree of pragmatism that is not apparent in their approach to sexual and family relations, positions that have affected public policy in countries such as Mexico, Peru, Costa Rica, Colombia, Argentina and others.

According to official versions of Opus Dei's history, the organization was founded on October 2, 1928, in Madrid when Escrivá de Balaguer had a "divine inspiration." He described it as follows: "I was enlightened about all of the Work...I thanked the Lord...From that day this mangy ass realized the beautiful and heavy burden that the Lord, in His inexplicable goodness, had put upon his shoulders. That day the Lord founded the Work."

On February 14, 1930, almost two years after the founding of Opus Dei, Escrivá de Balaguer created a separate but connected organization for women.

Some analysts consider the founding of Opus Dei as one of the many attempts by conservative thinkers to "rechristianize" Spain in the face of the socialist, revolutionary and agnostic currents that prevailed in some sectors of that society at the time.

Given its ideological affinity for the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, Opus Dei flourished in Spain. Today, Opus Dei supporters tend to skim over this fact. They say, for example, that Escrivá de Balaguer saw Franco as a "lesser

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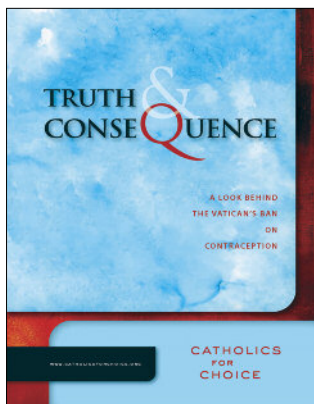


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very early stages of the development of the life of the new human being.

The impact of this strategy to designate contraceptives as abortifacient can be seen in several Latin American countries. In particular, a number of legal cases have been filed with the objective of prohibiting the sale and distribution of emergency contraception (EC), claiming that it acts as an abortifacient. (Legal cases have also been filed claiming that most methods of contraception in circulation are abortifacient). The first case began

### CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF LAW

The encyclical also calls on the faithful to exercise conscientious objection at every opportunity, with the spurious argument that faithful Catholics are not required to obey laws that are contrary to religious principles. The encyclical affirms “abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection. From the very beginnings of the Church, the apostolic

tive rights in the region, the expansion of claims around conscientious objection has become a new strategy to reduce the legitimacy and effectiveness of the regulations. Abuse of this strategy has led to an attempt to standardize conscientious objection in order to transform it from an individual right into an institutional right and, in some cases, to completely prevent health centers from providing abortion services, even in places or circumstances where it is legal. Conscientious objection is promoted among all types of personnel, from doctors and nurses to administrative staff who are directly or indirectly involved in the provision of legal abortion and even to government bureaucrats and administrative employees who may conduct civil unions or marriages between people of the same gender. This strategy has imposed new obstacles in the way of those who legitimately seek to exercise their rights to access legal services. (A series of three publications from Catholics for Choice, “In Good Conscience,” provide an overview of how conscience clauses have been used by antichoice activists in the US, Latin America and Europe. They also include a progressive Catholic perspective on conscience and the provision of reproductive healthcare services. They are available at [www.CatholicsForChoice.org](http://www.CatholicsForChoice.org).)



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Josemaria Escrivá holds a catechetical meeting with women who are involved in the apostolate of Opus Dei in this undated photo.

in Argentina in 1998 and at least 14 similar cases have been filed against EC in Latin America since. (For more information on this subject, see the recent Catholics for Choice/International Consortium on Emergency Contraception briefing paper “Emergency Contraception: Catholics in Favor, Bishops Opposed,” available on both organizations’ websites.) These attacks on EC can be seen as a form of retaliation for the successes that those in favor of sexual and reproductive freedoms have had in raising the decriminalization of abortion as an urgent matter, among other issues.

preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities, but at the same time it firmly warned that “we must obey God rather than men.” This type of instruction is repeated in a series of official documents on diverse rights, such as sex education (“The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality,” 1995) or the recognition of rights for same-sex couples (“Considerations Regarding Proposals to Give Legal Recognition to Unions between Homosexual Persons,” 2003).

In the face of repeated advances by those who support sexual and reproduc-

### THE SHIFT TOWARD SECULAR ARGUMENTS

While the Catholic hierarchy has a long tradition of using scientific arguments to justify doctrinal teachings, the incursion of sexual and reproductive rights into the discourse has in fact strengthened a strategy that defends a unique concept of family and sexuality. In this sense, the encyclical promotes the idea that preserving antichoice ideals is the task of intellectuals, to whom “a special task falls.... [They] are called to be present and active in the leading centres where culture is formed, in schools and universities, in places of scientific and technological research, of artistic creativity and of the study of man. Allowing their talents





A tapestry at the Vatican displays the image of Josemaría Escrivá during his canonization ceremony.

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and activity to be nourished by the living force of the Gospel, they ought to place themselves at the service of a new culture of life by offering serious and well documented contributions, capable of commanding general respect and interest by reason of their merit.” As part of this strategy, the same year the encyclical was introduced, Pope John Paul II created the Pontifical Academy for Life whose objectives are the “study, information and formation on the principal problems of biomedicine and of law, relative to the promotion and defense of life, above all in the direct relation that they have with Christian morality and the directives of the Church’s Magisterium.”

Without denying that religious arguments, reflections on sacred texts or the threat of excommunication continue to be part of the hierarchy’s strategy, neo-conservative Catholic movements increasingly and with greater intensity privilege scientific, legal and bioethical arguments. The importance that academic centers have is also growing, and some conservative Catholic universities have become

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evil” compared to the danger of a “communist government.” However, the founder did not have that attitude, as evidenced, for example, by a congratulatory letter he sent from Rome to Franco on May 23, 1958. A copy was published in the magazine *Razón Española* in January-February 2001.

In the letter, he sent his “most sincere congratulations” to the dictator because Franco (“the authorized voice of the Head of State”) had proclaimed that “the Spanish Nation considers it most honorable to observe the Law of God, in accordance with the doctrine of the one and only Holy Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church, with Faith inseparable from the national conscience that will inspire its legislation.”

He concluded: “I ask God our Father to fill Your Excellency with all manner of good fortune and to give you abundant grace as you carry out the high mission entrusted to you. Receive, Your Excellency, testimony of my most distinguished personal consideration with assurances of my prayers for all of your family.”

On August 5, 1982, Pope John Paul II, who very much sympathized with the conservative tendencies of Opus Dei, established it as a personal prelature, or group that carries out specific pastoral activities and is supervised by the Vatican’s Congregation for Bishops.

The prelate is elected by an executive congress called for that purpose and holds the office for life. The first prelate was Escrivá de Balaguer. Upon his death in 1975, he was succeeded by Alvaro del Portillo (1914-1994), who Opus Dei wants to canonize. He in turn was succeeded by Javier Echevarría Rodríguez, the current prelate. Born in Madrid in 1932, the latter has belonged to Opus Dei since 1948. He holds a JUD, meaning that he has a doctorate in both canon and civil law. On April 9, 1997, during a visit to Sicily, he declared “A survey says that 90 percent of the physically and mentally handicapped are the children of parents who entered marriage in an impure state.”

Acting in lockstep with the Vatican, Opus Dei opposes *inter alia*, abortion, contraception, divorce and gay marriage. In particular, Opus Dei authors take pride in their opposition to divorce and their contempt for civil matrimony, as well as their radical opposition to contraceptives and homosexuality.

Escrivá’s writings tended towards describing and mandating an all-encompassing vision of how members of Opus Dei should lead their lives. It was later that the specifics emerged from other members as regards public policy mandates—especially around the family. He advised young members of Opus Dei to attain prestige in their professional careers in order to use it over time to benefit the political and religious plans of the group. In “The Forge,” he also prescribed that:

We have to stand out boldly against those ‘damning freedoms’—those daughters of license, granddaughters of evil passions, great granddaughters of original sin—which come down, as you can see, in a direct line from the devil.

Throughout its more than 80 years of existence, Opus Dei has demonstrated not only a great capacity to grow, but also greater stability than many other conservative Catholic groups such as the Legionaries of Christ.

So far the main criticisms of Opus Dei coming from former members and analysts of that group relate to what they describe as its authoritarianism, the rigidity of its standards, its interference in the personal lives of its members, misogyny and the manner in which it participates in business and politics.

According to some of its critics, the manner in which Opus Dei operates in the business world—where it has adopted a generally liberal and pragmatic approach—is in sharp contrast to its approach to sexuality, procreation and family life where it adheres to strictly conservative religious standards, which it considers in accord with so-called “natural law.”

María del Carmen Tapia, who belonged to Opus Dei for 18 years, concluded that it  
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“is the most conservative, retrograde and sectarian organization of the Roman Catholic church...a church within the church, with all the characteristics of a sect.”

### BY THE NUMBERS

Some 2,000 members of Opus Dei are priests who belong to the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross. In addition, more than 20 bishops around the world belong to Opus Dei, including Jose H. Gomez, coadjutor bishop of Los Angeles, California; John J. Myers of Newark, New Jersey; Robert W. Finn of Kansas City, Missouri; Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, New York; John O. Barres of Allentown, Pennsylvania; the cardinal of Lima, Juan Luis Cipriani Thorne; the bishop of Huanacavelica, Peru, Isidro Barrio Barrio; the archbishop of Cuzco, Peru, Juan Antonio Ugarte Perez; as well as Gabino Miranda Melgarejo, auxiliary bishop of Ayacucho, Peru; and the prelate of Juli, also in Peru, José María Ortega Trinidad.

In 1993, there were about 79,000 lay members of the prelature in 54 countries on five continents. In 2005 that figure was estimated to be about 90,000. According to the 2007 Pontifical Yearbook (“Anuario Pontificio”), Opus Dei had 1,956 priests worldwide and 84,349 lay members, for a total of 86,305 members. Fifty-five percent of all Opus Dei members are women and about 90 percent of them live in Europe and Latin America, while only about 3,000 live in the US.

Its assets in the US are calculated to be about \$344.4 million and \$2.8 billion worldwide according to figures from a 2008 study by investigator and journalist John L. Allen Jr. of the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Opus Dei owns 1,752 residences worldwide and has properties such as Murray Hill in New York City, a 17-floor skyscraper completed in 2001, which is now the headquarters for the vicar of Opus Dei in the US, as well as 60 resident numeraries, various offices and a conference center. It cost \$70 million, half of which came from one donation and the rest from 5,000 small contributions.

### LATIN AMERICA

Opus Dei is active in almost all Latin American countries, where approximately one-third of its members live.

It began its work in Mexico in 1949. Today Mexico is the country with the most Opus Dei members outside of Spain.

Opus Dei began activities in Chile and Argentina in 1950, Colombia and Venezuela (1951), Guatemala and Peru (1953), Ecuador (1954), Uruguay (1956), Brazil (1957), El Salvador (1958), Costa Rica (1959), Paraguay (1962), Bolivia (1978), Honduras (1980), the Dominican Republic (1988), Nicaragua (1992) and Panama (1996).

### SCHOOLS

Opus Dei promotes many activities—whether cooperatively or through its members, who act individually but with institutional consent—especially in providing schools for the elite. Many of the activists who work against reproductive rights and the secular state have graduated from these schools.

Among the schools that Opus Dei manages in Latin America are the Universidad de La Sabana, in Colombia; Instituto Panamericano de Alta Dirección de Empresas (IPADE) in Mexico; the Universidad Austral in Argentina; the Universidad de Piura in Peru; the Universidad de los Andes in Chile; and many other schools, from elementary schools to secondary schools, training centers, schools for hospitality, gastronomy and other areas, and centers for social assistance and community development, in rural and urban areas.

One of the main Opus Dei business schools in Latin America is IPADE, founded in 1967 with support of leading businessmen: Manuel Senderos Irigoyen, Gastón Azcárraga Tamayo, José María Basagoiti, Baltasar Márquez, Alejandro Álvarez Guerrero, Carlos Isoard, and Eneko Belausteguioitia.



Leaflets containing information about Opus Dei outside the organization's building in New York.

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think tanks from which strategies are generated. In other articles, I have described these changes as “strategic secularism,” in order to capture the increasing centrality that non-religious arguments are having within conservative Catholic activism.

The clash between those with differing views over sexual diversity and access to reproductive healthcare services has generated new strategies, participants and arguments on both sides of the debate. We have seen many advances for women and men as a result of the struggles undertaken by those we label prochoice. However, these struggles have also led to the development of new strategies by a faction of conservative Catholic organizations that not only has established new obstacles, but has also rearticulated the boundaries between that which is religious and that which is secular in policies on sexuality. ■