

Controversial beatification nears

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

We are now only three months away from what could prove to be one of the most divisive ecclesiastical events of the post-Vatican II era: the beatification in May of Opus Dei's founder, Monsignor Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer (whose original name was simply Josemaria Escriva).

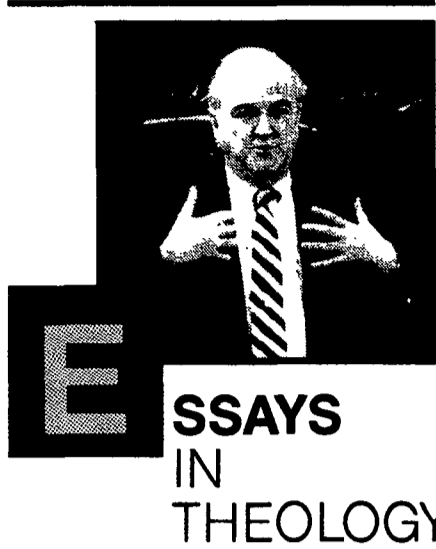
In recent months grave concerns have been expressed in various countries about the whole process and about its potentially scandalous outcome. (According to a recent report in *Newsweek*, one of the dissenting judges in the case said exactly that: beatifying Monsignor Escriva could cause the church "grave public scandal.")

The concerns raise at least four questions:

1. What's the rush? Monsignor Escriva died in 1975. Others before him had to wait more than 50 years before their causes could even be considered.

At least two cardinals have publicly questioned the speed of the process: Cardinal Enrique y Tarazon, past president of the Spanish Bishops' Conference, and Cardinal Silvio Oddi, former member of the Roman curia, who has said that the push to make Monsignor Escriva a saint has done Opus Dei "more harm than good" and that many bishops are "very displeased."

2. Why were several former members of Opus Dei refused an opportunity to testify before church



tribunals investigating the founder's life?

According to reports in the July 27, 1991, edition of *The Tablet* of London and the Jan. 13, 1992, *Newsweek*, Maria del Carmen Tapia, a numerary (or celibate lay leader) for 18 years and one who worked directly with the founder in Rome as his secretary, claims that Monsignor Escriva had "no respect" for Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, that he was a man of "great ambition," and that he also had "a great ability to manipulate."

Miquel Fisac, a 78-year-old Spanish architect who was one of the first members of Opus Dei, also tried unsuccessfully to testify. He had known Monsignor Escriva for 20 years; indeed his family had helped him escape from Spain during the civil war. Fisac remembers

Escriva as a "man who spoke badly about everyone."

Monsignor Escriva's own nephew, Carlos Albas Minquez, has stated that "arrogance was one of my uncle's traits."

More recent charges have been raised by Father Vladimir Felzmann, a member of Opus Dei for 22 years and now a priest of the Archdiocese of Westminster in England.

Last November Father Felzmann sent to the pro-nuncio in London, Archbishop Luigi Barbarito, information about Monsignor Escriva that should have at least delayed the rush to beatification. In a covering letter, Father Felzmann's bishop, Cardinal Basil Hume, described the priest as "a highly responsible person who seems to have known Monsignor Escriva very well."

Archbishop Barbarito promised to bring the information to the attention of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, but nothing more was heard about the matter. So Father Felzmann went public, giving interviews on British television and to Peter Hebblethwaite, Vatican affairs correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter*, and to *Newsweek*.

Father Felzmann vividly recalls the founder defending Adolf Hitler, insisting that Hitler could not have killed six million Jews, but "only four million."

According to Father Felzmann, Monsignor Escriva had a foul temper, was extremely vain, and played loose with the truth in dealings with the parents of Opus Dei candidates

and in business matters. Monsignor Escriva once said that "for Opus Dei, all is fair in love and war."

Father Felzmann discloses that Monsignor Escriva, because of his animosity toward the Second Vatican Council, seriously considered leaving the Catholic Church to join the Greek Orthodox Church.

Monsignor Escriva actually traveled to Greece with his private secretary and the general secretary of Opus Dei to investigate the possibility of becoming an Orthodox, but he was put off by the fact that "the congregations and the churches were very small."

3. Why has the beatification process been so closely linked with Opus Dei itself?

The monsignor's alleged miracles were performed on Opus Dei members and attested to by doctors at the Opus Dei university of Navarre. The priest handling the case in the Congregation for the Causes of Saints is also an Opus Dei member.

4. Why has Opus Dei refused to allow outsiders to see the material on which the founder's "heroic virtues" were judged? According to *Newsweek*, those familiar with the beatification process describe this as an unprecedented act of secrecy.

Until such questions are satisfactorily answered (and they are not answered by simply attacking those who raise them), there will be a cloud not only over the monsignor but over the whole canonization process as well.

The first harms only Opus Dei; the other harms the church.

Church, state 'an uneasy partnership'

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

"The church should be more involved in politics."

"The church shouldn't be involved in politics at all."

This is usually how the debate is framed, and — depending on the particular issue or issues being discussed — people come down on one side or another.

An assumption is being made, however, that must be recognized. When people talk about whether "the church" should or should not be involved in politics, most often they mean the "institutional" church — be it on the parish, diocesan, national or international level. Thus, what people are arguing about is whether or not the leaders of the church, or even the church as a body, ought to be speaking out and attempting to influence public policy.

This is an interesting question and eminently debatable, but it is not the same question as whether "the church" ought to be involved in politics. The church is, after all,

the people of God, and through its members the church is and must be involved in politics. Some of them are even called to serve in the political arena in a special way. These politicians can be full-time professionals or part-time volunteers.

One such politician who has reflected at length on the connection between his faith and his work is Sen. Paul Simon of Illinois, who recently delivered the prestigious Mark Gibbs Lecture in Chicago on "The Uneasy Partnership of Church and State."

"One of the reasons for conflict in church-state relationships," he said, "is that the nature of making political decisions involves compromises that have to be worked out between two or more points of view. If that did not happen, democratic government would be ineffective and replaced by some form of dictatorship. Those of us in politics recognize that practical compromises have to take place."

"In a strange way," Simon commented wryly, "political leaders sometimes embrace the doctrine of sin more than religious leaders do.

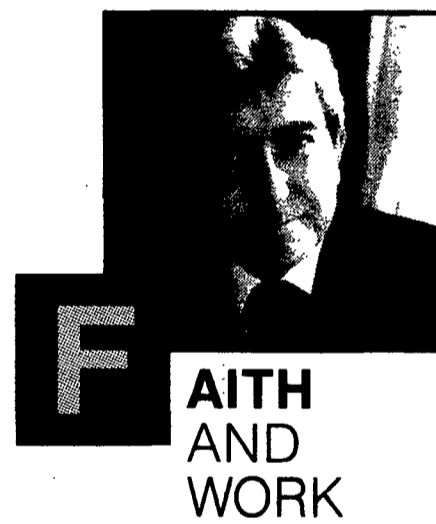
For those of us in politics recognize that there is at least the remote possibility that we could be wrong. We recognize the imperfection that is part of our lives. Religious leaders, who preach about the doctrine of sin and fallibility, sometimes are more reluctant to apply that doctrine to themselves."

Simon warned against politicians who use religion rather than honor it by wearing the badge of religion for political convenience.

"It is difficult for the public to know when the public language and the private language of an official or a candidate differ markedly," he warned, "but the public would be wise to use caution in assuming someone is 'a good Christian candidate' or 'a good Jewish candidate' because of mouthed pieties."

The biblical "By their fruits ye shall know them" is better advice than the non-biblical "By their speeches ye shall know them," Simon insisted.

Simon concluded with this plea for understanding politicians: "We are not just, but we can be searchers for justice. We are not always



understanding, but we can pursue understanding. We are not always right, but we can seek what is right. We do not hold the truth, but we can search for the truth. We do not have peace, but we can come much closer to it. We do not see the future clearly, but we can improve our vision for a better nation and a better world."

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