

Opus Dei down to one top Vatican official; Benedict's ties to Communion and Liberation deepen

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 16, 2007

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With the resignation of Cardinal Julian Herranz as President of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts on Thursday, Opus Dei has now lost two of three positions as heads of Vatican offices it once held under Pope John Paul II. The last remaining Opus Dei official who serves as the top official in a Vatican department is Giò Maria Poles, a layman who runs the Labor Office of the Holy See, in effect its personnel office.

Herranz, who will turn 77 in March, was replaced by Auxiliary Bishop Francesco Coccopalmerio of Milan, a protégé of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the former archbishop of Milan. Coccopalmerio becomes an archbishop upon the appointment.

Opus Dei's other high-profile Vatican loss came with the July resignation of Spanish layman Joaquin Navarro-Valls as Vatican spokesperson, who was replaced by Italian Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi.

While both resignations were for reasons of age, and while Benedict XVI chose to appoint another Opus Dei member, Spanish Monsignor Juan Ignacio Arrieta Ochoa de Chinchetru, as the new number two official in the Council for Legislative Texts, the departures of Herranz and Navarro-Valls nevertheless represent a step back from the high water mark of Opus Dei's influence in the Vatican under John Paul's pontificate.

Founded in Spain in 1928 by St. Josemaria Escriva, Opus Dei is the lone "Personal Prelature" in the Catholic Church. Its spiritual aim is the sanctification of everyday work. In the internal politics of Catholicism in the period following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), Opus Dei has come to be seen as a leading symbol of the church's conservative wing.

Opus Dei has some 85,000 members worldwide.

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Herranz, who knew Escriva personally, is a longtime veteran of the Roman Curia. He staffed the commission on the "Discipline of the Clergy," which prepared the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* on priestly life and ministry at Vatican II.

In a 2005 interview, Herranz, who had worked in the Roman Curia for 44 years at the time, denied that there was an "Opus Dei block" within the Vatican.

"There's no lobby, no kind of 'white masonry.' I've heard these things, but no," he said. "In all these years, I've only gone once to the Office of Labor, not to see Poles but because there was a question I had to deal with. I see Navarro every now and then. My prelate is not the prelate of Opus Dei. My prelate is called John Paul II. I receive orders from him, the pope, and I execute them."

Herranz added that he has never discussed Vatican business with the prelate of Opus Dei.

"I've never asked the prelate for advice on what to do," he said. "If I need that kind of advice, we have 55 consultants from all over the world who are experts in the questions we handle. This is something that has caused Opus Dei to suffer much, because some people haven't understood it. They've mistaken Opus Dei for a kind of political party, or an ecclesiastical party," he said.

While John Paul had a special affinity for Opus Dei, Benedict XVI's closest relationship with one of the so-called "new movements" in the church has long been with Communion and Liberation, founded in Italy by Fr. Luigi Giussani in 1954.

The pope's personal household is run by consecrated lay women who belong to Memores Domini, part of the Communion and Liberation network. Memores Domini members put their property in common, practice chastity, and live obedience, but they do not wear religious habits nor take vows. They devote at least a couple of hours of their day to prayer and contemplation, but remain "totally immersed in the world" and earn their living by their own work.

When Giussani died in 2005, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger arranged at his own initiative to be named by John Paul II as the pope's official delegate, delivering a glowing homily at the Feb. 24 funeral Mass in Milan. At that time, Ratzinger told a priest associated with CL that Giussani had "changed my life."

An official of Communion and Liberation recently confirmed that Benedict XVI joins the Memores Domini members in his household for their weekly "School of Community," one of the building blocks of the formation offered by Communion and Liberation. Members around the world gather weekly to study a text from Giussani; presently, they're reading *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*, which collects Giussani's early works on the Christian experience, written from 1959-64.

Other top prelates whose households are run by Memores Domini members include Cardinal Angelo Scola in Venice, Cardinal Carlo Caffarra of Bologna, and Bishop Luigi Negri of San Marino-Montefeltro.

There are an estimated 60 "Schools of Community" in the United States, though Communion and Liberation officials estimate their total membership at "a few hundred."

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