

A Journey to Eternity

My Years in Opus Dei: 1959 – 1982



Professor Monsignor Vladimir Felzmann
(aka Father Vlad)

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Professor Monsignor Vladimir Felzmann

Father Vlad Felzmann was born in Prague in 1939 and came to London at the end of World War II. He studied Civil Engineering at Imperial College London and received his Doctorate in Divinity (summa cum laude) from the Lateran University in Rome.

Vlad has led retreats, lectured to and spiritually guided people ever since his priestly ordination in 1969. He speaks English, Czech, and still a bit of Spanish, Italian, French and used to speak Latin. He enjoys friendship, prayer and writing. He keeps as fit as possible and does press-ups – alternating this with squats – daily to the total of each year of his life since conception.

He was director of the Diocese of Westminster's work with Young People and Canary Wharf Multifaith Chaplaincy Catholic Chaplain. For many years he was a Trustee of The Passage and is the Catholic Chaplain for Sport, founder of the John Paul II Foundation for Sport (which he launched in 2011), chair of CaAPA, and trustee emeritus of Genesis. A social entrepreneur, Vlad founded and directed two different Diocesan Pilgrimages – YAP for young people and WDP for all – to Lourdes and founded the Spiritual Peer Educational Centres SPEC, LOFT and SPECeast.



Main facade of St Peter's Basilica, Rome

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Professor Monsignor Vladimir Felzmann
(aka Father Vlad)

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Introduction

For many years, I have kept this document under wraps. My closest friends said it would not change the world but it might change my life. However, now 84 years old and retired – and having discovered that, on Monday 29 November 2021, Pope Francis, during his audience with the Prelate of Opus Dei, Mgr. Fernando Ocariz, encouraged Opus Dei ‘to spread around the world the spirit of veracity, to oppose the superficiality and lack of justice that reign in social relations’ – I decided it was time for me to publish the second chapter of my life story: *A Journey to Eternity*.

I was further encouraged to publish this book when I learned that Pope Francis, in a *Moto Proprio Ad charisma tuendum*, 22 July 2022, said that he wanted Opus Dei to ‘introduce greater transparency within the government of the Catholic Church’.

Writing this book has enabled me to see not only how I helped Opus Dei develop but also, and more importantly for me, how these years shaped my life.

I know that, in the years since I left, Opus Dei is evolving for the better. For example, Numerary (that is celibate) members are now allowed to stay overnight with their families. This was not allowed while I was a Numerary from 1959 -1982.

I hope this book will help those interested in Opus Dei to better understand its nature and *modus vivendi*, discover what I learned and why – after twenty-two years as a Numerary member – I decided I had to leave.

Dramatis Personae

People

Jose Maria Escrivá de Balaguer y Albas (towards end of life changed to Josemaria – so that he could be the first saint of that name). Internally in Opus Dei, always referred to as ‘The Father’.

- Born 9 January 1902, Barbastro, Spain.
- Ordained Priest 1925.
- Spent his summers in London, 1958-1962.
- Died 1975.
- Beatified 1992.
- Canonized 2002.

Jose Maria claimed that after a retreat while in Madrid in 1928 he saw what became called Opus Dei. However, in 2000, while I was teaching theology in Lourdes, I discovered that he had previously met Tilla Volhopp; a founder-member in 1922 of Cardinal Mercier’s Auxiliaries of the Apostolate, whose members were, and still are, totally lay. Apparently, when she told him that the Auxiliaries took no vows, he said without a vow of obedience discipline in the organisation would not be possible.

Hence, Numeraries and Oblates/Associates in Opus Dei profess their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. From everything I saw of them at Lourdes, the Auxiliaries have admirable discipline.

From 1936-1939 he lived through the Spanish Civil War and as soon as that ended, he found himself under attack from what he saw as the Jesuit opposition. Hence the palpable paranoia, secrecy and superiority complex in Opus Dei.

In 1969 he was delighted to discover his nobility, and the right to call himself Marques de Peralta. His coat of arms swiftly appeared on a wall (out of bounds for students) in the Opus Dei HQ at Viale Bruno Buozzi in Rome.

Álvaro del Portillo y Diez de Sollano (1914-1994).

In 1935 he joined Opus Dei as a Spanish engineer and was ordained priest in 1944 to become Opus Dei General Secretary. He ended up as a Bishop, the prelate of Opus Dei between 1982 and 1994 as the successor to Jose Maria Escrivá. He was beatified on 27 September 2014 in Madrid.

Professor John Anthony Henry (11 March 1939 – 8 May 2007).

A Numerary member of Opus Dei from 1939- 2007, who specialised in toxicology at the Faculty of Medicine, Imperial College London, at St Mary’s Hospital in Paddington. He conducted research on the health effects of cannabis, cocaine and other recreational drugs.

The Hon. Greville Howard (1909-1987).

An Old Etonian and Tory MP for St Ives and the Isles of Scilly from 1950-1966. He married Mary Ridehalgh in 1945. His constituency home in Treskello, Marazion, Cornwall had a large chalet-type building in the garden where some members of my family used to spend at least a week of their summer holidays.

Patrick and Anna McMahon.

Patrick was a teacher at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School. They became great friends of mine, whom I married. I then baptised four of their children and was Godfather to their son Marco. I took the weddings of Francesca to Jahrad 'Jazz' Haq on the 28 October 2006 at Ealing Abbey; and Nicole to Robert Gibson. Ever since she qualified and still in 2023 Francesca is my pro-bono and brilliant dentist. I celebrated the baptisms of Lorenzo and Annabella Haq, as well as Angus and Ronan Gibson.

Anthony Pellegrini.

Known by many as 'Pele'. Headmaster of Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School from 1976-1997. He joined the school as a general-subjects' teacher immediately after graduating from the London School of Economics, and in 1969 was appointed deputy head. I met him in 1973.

John and Mary Redvers and their children, David, Kate, and Diana.

In 1970, John came to see me at Netherhall House. Living just down the road near Finchley Road Underground station, he said he had time on his hands as Mary was, as he put it, "being tidied up", after giving birth to their son, David. While painting portraits in Spain, John had heard about Opus Dei. He wanted to find out more. We started to go for weekly walks around Regents Park, the post-script of which was always a pint in a Finchley Road pub. We became friends. I was Godfather to their daughter Kate and baptised their youngest daughter, Di.

Javier Echevarría Rodríguez (1932 – 2016).

A Numeracy member of Opus Dei. Ordained priest 1955, he became the Secretary General of Opus Dei in 1975. Soon after he took over as head of Opus Dei in 1994, he was ordained a bishop. (While I was in Rome, to me he was always just Javi.)

Mgr. Phillip Sherrington (13 June 1943 – 27 February 1995).

The Regional Vicar of Opus Dei in Britain for nearly twenty years. He died in an accident while walking in the Connemara Mountains, in the west of Ireland.

Places

Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School (earlier known as the Cardinal Vaughan School).

A Roman Catholic secondary school in Holland Park, London founded by Henry Fitzalan-Howard, 15th Duke of Norfolk in 1914. I worked there from 1973-1985 under two of its Headmasters, Monsignor Richard Kenefeck (1952-1976) and Anthony Pellegrini (1976-1997).

City & Guilds.

The Engineering Section of Imperial College (IC) on Exhibition Road, London.

Grandpont House.

In Oxford, by Folly Bridge, on the south, Portsmouth Diocese side of the Thames or Isis.

Lakefield Domestic Science School for women; now Lakefield Hospitality College.

A member of Netherhall Educational Association – and located just around the corner from Netherhall House, whose cleaning, linen, laundry and meals were taken care of by Lakefield Hospitality College.

Netherhall House (NH).

Purchased by Opus Dei in 1952, and part of the Netherhall Educational Association (NEA). It “aims to provide all-round formation for people of all ages, especially the young, to help them develop their talents to the full and use them in the service of society”. Even though Opus Dei always stated that it did not own all the NEA centres, when I left it in 1982, all the directors of NEA were members of Opus Dei. Thus, it seems to me that, if technically not owned by, it was under the full control of Opus Dei.

Roman College, Collegio Romano della Santa Croce.

When I was there, on Viale Bruno Buozzi, Rome. Now the Opus Dei seminary is based at Via di Grottarossa in Rome. Integrated into Villa Tevere, which had been the home of Hungary’s ambassador to The Holy See, it was acquired by Opus Dei in 1947. Purposefully, to avoid it catching the eyes of passersby, it was set behind a series of non-descript buildings. It is the international headquarters of Opus Dei.

Wickenden Manor.

Chilling St, East Grinstead. Acquired by Netherhall Educational Association in 1964 who turned it into a Retreat/Conference Centre.

Opus Dei: The Work

On its website, ignoring Cardinal Mercier's Auxiliaries of the Apostolate, who, without becoming religious, could live a life of personal sanctification through their ordinary lay lives, Opus Dei claims that it is: "A new way of sanctification in the middle of the world, through the exercise of ordinary daily work and the fulfilment of family, social and personal obligations."

- October 1928 for men only.
- February 1930 women can join.
- February 1943 it becomes the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross
- 1948 Opus Dei became a Secular Institute and in 1982 a Personal Prelature.

Chapter One

London. 1959-1965

As mentioned in the first volume of my auto-biography 'A Journey to Eternity' on Tuesday 22 September 1959, I discussed my vocation with my Dad who agreed I could join Opus Dei. Thus, by simply writing a letter to The Father requesting admission, I became a member of Opus Dei. In the internal language of Opus Dei, I had "whistled" as a Numerary member.

In Madrid back in the 1930s, "to whistle" was a slang term that meant, "to function well, to steam fast forward like a train, whistling." The Father used it to refer to the fact that someone had asked for admission to Opus Dei.

The following Friday I moved into Netherhall House at 18 Netherhall Gardens, London NW3, a residence run by Opus Dei with a large garden for university students, opened in April 1952. Heady, joyful days. I felt, as they say, "Over the moon". I was home. Finally, I could give myself, daily, fully to God. I felt that, with effort and commitment, I could become capax dei by the day of my birth into divine eternity. Opus Dei would be The Way of my Cross.

Swiftly, I was introduced into a Numerary's life-style with its daily pious practices called Norms. As you will see in Appendix D, these were spiritual reading. My favourites were Saint Teresa of Avila and her The Way of Perfection and The Interior Castle and St John of the Cross and his The Ascent of Mount Carmel, The Spiritual Canticle and The Living Flame of Love.

I also very much liked his The Dark Night, a copy of which I had received as a Clapham College 5th form RE prize in 1955. Soon after my Personal Pentecost on Eriskay in 1954, (where, totally unexpectedly, "I fell in love with infinity") while browsing in Foyles on Charing Cross Road, I had first come across St John of The Cross. His writings, then way beyond my full understanding, drew me onto a closer and deeper relationship with God.

I was quickly introduced to a Numerary's corporal mortification: the daily two hours of wearing a cilice, (a spiked garter), weekly self-scourging and one night sleeping on the floor with just a telephone directory for my pillow. The Father was a traditionalist-elitist. Whatever any religious order had done down the ages, we would do it. More intensely. Better. Only the best was good enough for God.

Until I left Netherhall House in 1965, a week before each Ash Wednesday I used to ask my Spiritual Director for permission to use the whip once more than last Lent. No one ever asked me how many times that was! Consequently, inspired by the Curé d'Ars and his legendary, and to me inspiring, rigorous mortifications, to prove my own love of God, by the time I departed for Rome in 1965, I was using it five times a week every Lent. Though it could have been

caused by my mild OCD, I imagined it was a sacramental expression of my desire to love God, as God showed he loved me in the passion and death of Jesus Christ.

I learned to greet Opus Dei members with the word Pax and hear the response, *In Aeternum*. I soon got used to listening to Opus Dei priests giving their meditation in a dark oratory with the only light coming from the table where they sat. Rarely did their preaching move my heart. Most were worthy and dull. Looking back, it was due to their lack of poetry and examples from real life and the emphasis on quotes from scripture and, above all, omnipresent quotes from The Father.



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A cilice garter belt used by Opus Dei members for mortification. A spiked belt that goes around the upper thigh, it has a belt strap to attach it to the leg meaning you can tighten it. It leaves great marks.

Living the spirit of Opus Dei, which included having no contact with the opposite sex and never being in a room alone with one woman, as well as guarding the eyes so as not to look at anything that might stir up sexual desires was, in those early years, for me an attractive challenge. As in sport so in spirituality, I yearned to improve my personal best. In my Opus Dei days, acquiring virtues were my priority.

Writing this in 2023, I suspect it was this approach to my life and also personal relationships that I hoped would make me accepted and appreciated by God. Who knows? Whatever the motivations, my will power and commitment shaped my character. For someone with mild OCD, acquiring the Opus Dei virtues seemed the best way to develop a loving relationship with God.

When having my weekly confidence meeting with my spiritual director, I was never asked how my relationship with God was developing. The agenda focused on how, box-ticking, I was living the Opus Dei Norms and Customs: a guaranteed railroad to my sanctity and heaven. The Opus Dei Norms shaped my relationship with God in eternity, not the divine presence in everyone. Never once did I make a sandwich for a homeless person. Jesus Christ's "What you do to the least of mine, you do unto me." (Mt 25, 40) did not influence my ethics. In those days, being good was more important than doing good.

Earlier in my life, at school I had trained hard to become a footballer and athlete accepted and appreciated by my peers. It seemed to me that sport was a metaphor for life. The virtues acquired in sport I could transfer to my spiritual and everyday life. After I had moved into Netherhall House, I started to take advantage of the Southwell House squash court just around the corner. (One shilling in the meter kept the lights on for half an hour.)

In 1958 the Imperial College Boat Club (ICBC) did not have rowing machines; there was just a pool of water flanked by a sliding seat and facing my face as I rowed, a large mirror. This enabled me to develop an efficient technique and, after many hours of work, a stronger physique. The morning after my first afternoon session there, I painfully discovered that the claim I had heard that rowing uses all the muscles in your body was not true. My buttocks were tight and painful. These gluteus maximus, muscles had obviously been passive passengers in my boat.

In the spring of 1960, with the daffodils still fresh, my father invited me for a walk around Regents Park. He had underlined many a quote from 'The Way', a book about spirituality composed by Jose Maria Escrivá, a sort of Opus Dei bible that I had given him. He read them out. "These fascist ideas resonate with the thoughts of Adolf Hitler," he said. I listened to him and replied, "I will think about what you said." In the event, he died before I was able to get back to him.

As the 1960 summer term ended, I was appointed Secretary of Netherhall House. A full-time job and quite a challenge. At this time I was still at Imperial College studying for a degree in Civil Engineering. I was just about to start my final undergraduate year with all its exams.

But The Work was more important than my exams.

Having been told that God's grace was always enough, without any critical thoughts or feelings, I threw myself into my new responsibility of running Netherhall.

While helping the Director look after the Numeraries living at Netherhall House, I also had to balance the books, pay the bills and keep the building and its grounds in ship-shape condition. Once that was sorted, I had to find the time to study for my exams. Not surprisingly, I tended to stay up to three or even four o'clock in the morning.

Whatever the Director told me to do was God's will. Obeying Opus Dei, I was doing God's will. Opus Dei and God gradually merged into one.

I had been instructed that criticism was a sign of pride. Intellectual pride, according to Opus Dei, was the Original Sin. Fear of offending God numbed any doubts I might have felt that, rather than taking responsibility for my own choices and decisions, I was living like a child. Though at times demanding, life was clear. Simple.

On the 27 August 1960, in my new role as Secretary, I was presiding at dinner. I had just finished the main course when I received a message, "Please go to the telephone. Your mother is on the line."

My Mother, who was in London, came straight to the point. "I have just heard that Daddy has died."

On holiday with Georgie and Johnnie, two of my siblings, at Greville Howard's home at Marazion, Cornwall my Dad had suffered two heart attacks. After the first, he was taken to hospital. There he was offered a cup of tea. As they raised his head so he could drink it, he suffered another attack and died. The day before, he had been able to ride one of Greville's horses and wrote to my sister Jarmila, then in the USA, how thrilled he was to be able to ride a horse after all those years since his last ride in 1939!

I thanked Mummy. I said: "I am so sorry."

Then, as soon as I put down the receiver, as though nothing had happened, I went back to my table to continue, over the pudding, my conversation with the boys who were on our Summer Course for Foreign Students.

After all, striving for sanctity meant living way above the emotions. Feelings were irrelevant. Emotions were deemed to be like noisy children; a distracting nuisance for the adult intellect and will.

Holiness was to do with obedience, clear thinking and generous sacrifice. However, back in my bedroom, I did cry.

The Howards paid for and arranged for the hearse that brought Daddy's body back to London, the funeral in West Norwood and his burial in Streatham Cemetery.

Next morning, I was driven up to the Hampstead house where Escrivá was staying and where he used to write his Internal Encyclical/Pastoral Letters. (I later discovered that these carried dates from the 1930s to the 1950s. An interesting point for future historians and linguists to note.)



Don Alvaro, with The Father, Jose Maria Escrivá and Javier Echevarria Rodriguez, in London in the early 1960s

I had already met him a number of times the previous summer. During one of our meetings he had informed me that as the first Czechoslovak member of The Work, I would, one day, receive a special, small, wooden cross. I still have that cross at the back of one of my computer table drawers.

Now The Father hugged me and through a translator expressed his deepest sympathy and affection. It was the start of a special relationship. In time, I became *“el mimado del Padre”*; The Father's favourite.

The Father showed me genuine affection during my first fourteen years with Opus Dei. I remember how in 1960, as we both waved our hands at the same time and, sitting next to him, I burnt his hand with my cigarette. He laughed it off and gave me a hug.

The following year, while we were being driven round Regents Park he turned to me and said, "We understand each other".

As I write this, I now realise that like politicians through power, I was seduced by affection: *cariño*. I felt I belonged. I was home. The Father had become my new Daddy.

In the summers of 1960 to 1964, we, the Numeraries, travelled by train to Holyhead then by boat to Dublin and finally by car to Galway along what were then empty roads, to attend our Annual Courses in philosophy at the Opus Dei Gort Ard Residence on Rockbarton Road, Salthill, Galway.

For someone studying engineering at Imperial College, lectures on philosophy were rather challenging. However, it had to be done as, eventually, all male Numeraries had to take the full seminarian course in traditional Roman Catholic philosophy. It excluded Descartes and all subsequent thinkers.

Escrivá was ruthlessly loyal to the traditional church. Descartes's philosophy had offended the Church and in 1663 Descartes' work was put on its Index of Prohibited Books. The Church worried that his account of matter might be inconsistent with the Eucharist, and that he did not make the mind sufficiently independent of the body.

Numeraries were taught to ignore post-Descartian philosophes and to have no truck with Darwin and Freud. Thomas Aquinas was the safe intellectual haven for Numeraries.

Each year, on one of our *dies non-docens* (days off), we were often taken on tours of the countryside. I fell in love with Connemara and its heavily laden donkeys trundling along the almost deserted roads.

Funny, how memories retain absurdities. One evening, the dinner, I seem to remember it was called tea, was not ready at the usual hour. When the cook was asked what had happened, she explained it was "Due to the slow electricity that afternoon."

In 1960 and again in 1962, on a '*dies non docens*', four of us rowed in a hired boat up The River Corrib to Lough Corrib where, without landing, we enjoyed swimming in its pleasantly warm water.

Looking back, I realise I had fallen in love with Ireland's scenery. More importantly, perhaps due to Czechoslovakia and its history, I could empathise with the Irish and their take on the Saxons.

In 1963, back in Eire for another course of philosophy, on a day off, at the water's edge in Galway, I stood a couple of yards from President JF Kennedy just before he flew off in his helicopter. Five months before his assassination he referred to his visit to Eire as "the best four days of his life". (Well, he had seen me there!)

Travel was not just confined to Ireland. Just after Christmas in 1960, the Numerary who was to lead a group of Netherhall students on a skiing trip to the French Alps fell ill. The afternoon before they were to leave, I was asked to take his place.

I managed to find some old ex-army clothes and boots. Early next day we set off by train from Victoria; our final destination Peisey-Nancroix in the Savoie department in south-eastern France.

After we had loaded our rucksacks into the luggage van just behind the coal tender, we all went back to our carriage. Suddenly, one of the lads realised he had left his passport in his rucksack. I, ever keen to lead from the front, volunteered to go and fetch it.

While I was rummaging through the rucksacks, with my back to the door, someone slammed the van's doors shut. Through the metal bars protecting the window I tapped as hard as I could with my fingertips. To no avail. The porter's head did not turn. The engine sneeze-roared into life. The train started to move.

With no heating inside that van, I huddled inside my sleeping bag among the rucksacks until we reached Dover. The journey through France was more civilized. No one said anything about my journey from Victoria to Dover. I felt proud to have been heroic; a heroism known only to God.

However, once we arrived at our Peisey cottage accommodation, we soon discovered that the water, trickling down the walls as we went to bed, froze solid by the morning. Though the skiing was fine, I was not tempted to repeat the experience. I never skied again.

As part of my practical experience while studying for my degree, I spent the summer of 1960 working in the offices of Ove Arup engineers, just off Tottenham Court Road in London.

Decades later, whenever I passed through Wilton Place on my way from Westminster Cathedral's Clergy House to Victoria station, I often felt a quiver of pride. Though T-squared designing had long gone (and the external cladding of the building partially above the road had been up-dated a couple of times), the floors of that building which I had designed were still there, intact. In 1959 I had been elected Secretary to the Imperial College Boat Club. The following year I was elected Captain of Boats of the City & Guilds Boat Club.

In 1961, as was usual after the annual Morphy and Lowry Inter-IC Constituent College Races on the Thames at Putney came the annual Boat Club Dinner at the Imperial College Students Union.

As Captain of City & Guilds, I was to give one of the after-dinner speeches; my second public speaking performance. The first, as Clapham College Head Boy, I had rehearsed until I knew it by heart. Now, without notes, I would speak from the heart.

“The School of Mines had not won as they were clearly a minor college. The College of Science had failed to win, as they were physically feeble. Although City & Guilds, being a college for Civil Engineers, had been accused of many erections along the towpath, we had saved our energies and thus won both Morphy and Lowry Cups. Well done City & Guilds!”

How silly things survive in the memory! My words were well received. Mind you, we had been drinking all evening; and not just lemonade-bitter shandies.

Soon after that dinner, to avoid “wasting apostolic time” Opus Dei asked me to give up rowing. That hurt. I had loved rowing and pleasing my father who had himself rowed when young.

The sacrifice, the gift to God of what I had enjoyed so much and in which over three years I had won five pots (as the winner’s pewter tankards were called), felt sweet. Sacrifice was a sign of sanctity. The Work, outstanding in providing sacrificial opportunities, was my highway to holiness. Or so I thought then.

In those early 1960s, Galway was comfortably quiet, and solidly Catholic. No one I spoke with could have imagined how so much would have changed by the turn of the millennium.

Typically, Numeraries returned to the UK by car to Dublin, then on by boat to Holyhead and finally by train back to London. However, in 1962, as I was to direct the first Summer Course for Foreign Students at Greycarth in Manchester, I was put on a train, a very slow train that often stopped, for Dublin. There I took a boat to Liverpool and then on by train to Manchester.

During that journey, I developed in my right temple a number 10 on the Richter scale migraine. As soon as I arrived at Greycarth, I had to lie down in a dark bedroom. Though it took a couple of days before it fully faded, next morning I managed to get up for morning silent prayer and Mass. After breakfast - to prove I was macho - I forced myself to get on with the work.

As a culture enhancement element on that first Summer Course, we decided to take the students by coach for a couple of nights in Edinburgh. On our final afternoon, we allowed the lads to go off and buy souvenirs. They were to return

to the hotel and coach by 3.00pm. They all managed to do this except one lad who, for clearly corporeal reasons, had acquired the nickname of Bollita; Spanish for a small ball.

Panic. He, a son of a Spanish Minister, was missing.

Swiftly, I split the boys into groups of three and asked them to go and find him. Soon they did. He was eating a cake in a café not far down the street. Relief. How happy I was to get back to Manchester.

In prayer, I realised how narrow is the path to safety and success. How easily things can go unexpectedly wrong. My optimism, letting the lads go on their own, could have been a disaster. Safeguarding, and child protection had not been on the Opus Dei syllabus for Directors.

My final year as an undergraduate at Imperial College in 1961 was intense, exciting, complex, and then, due to the degree results, disappointing. Thanks to my full-time role as Netherhall House Secretary, I obtained a miserable 2:(ii) Honours BSc (Eng.). A fine lesson in humility. I had been accustomed to doing rather well in exams.

However, my Professor (whose name, alas, I cannot remember), had faith in me. In 1961, he obtained a scholarship for me to do post-graduate work. Rather than attend the lecture based DIC (Diploma of Imperial College), I was to concentrate on research.

The following year, I remember how coming out into the summer sunshine of Exhibition Road, I realised that I was the world's top expert on columns of steel tubes filled with concrete; a potential design for supporting parts of Spaghetti Junction on the M6 that Imperial College had been commissioned to investigate.

It was fascinating work. I had been told that I was working not just for my DIC but also after three years, a DSc (Eng.). However, Opus Dei had its own designs on me. After just one year, I was told to leave Imperial College with just that DIC.

It hurt. However, I had become accustomed to making sacrifices so with just "You know everything, you know that I love you, Lord," I got on with doing God's will as expressed by Opus Dei.

So, just after one year I handed over my research data to another student. My Professor said he would never understand why I gave up my research (which had been going rather well!). I replied with something along the lines of "God's plans for me are not my plans." Judging by his body language, he must have thought I was a bit of a nutter.

When, after my ordination, I started using the DIC as a post-nominal, many people, including the clergy, assumed I was a Canon Lawyer with Doctorate in Ius Canonicum. As I believe clarity is more important than accuracy, and I know very little canon law, rather than 'BSc (Eng), DIC' I use 'MSc (Eng.)' instead.

In the summer of 1961, I was appointed Director of Netherhall House; a responsibility I held until September 1965 when I departed for Rome.

Being the Director of a residence and a community of Opus Dei members, a job into which I put my all, turned out to be a joy.

I threw all my energies into successfully recruiting schoolboys and university students into Opus Dei. I organized lectures, courses and minibus camping trips for students. Overtly these were to help them develop their holistic education. Covertly they were there to introduce them to the Numeraries under my control, who would identify the stars and bring them into our spiritual meditations, circles of spiritual education and retreats.

All too often at Netherhall House, especially just before the lucrative Summer Course for Foreign Students, we experienced cash-flow problems. To ward off immediate confrontations, I took on an extra role: that of my own Private Secretary, or Personal Assistant.

Whenever the phone rang, I would answer it with a slightly down-market accent.

“Sorry, I am afraid Mr Felzmann is not in the office. I will let him know you called.”

“To whom am I speaking?”

“Mr Pilkington, John Pilkington, his secretary.” While working at Ove Arup, I had spent some time on a contract with Pilkington Glass. The name seemed sound. Not obviously dodgy like Smith or Jones.

That gave us an extra few days, enough time for another deposit or two to arrive and be banked.

I recently learned that Donald Trump used to do the same!

I remember how, having seen the Netherhall Gardens street cleaner pushing his cart up the road at the end of the day, I invited him to park it by the side of No 18. He was grateful. I never forget his face as, one sunny late afternoon, he looked with clearly deep satisfaction up his pristine clean street. A great day's work brought him joy. It reminded me that whatever our vocation, as long as we carry it out to the best of our abilities, can be satisfying.

Given the short time since I joined, and with no training, it was disconcerting to find myself spiritually directing some twenty members of Opus Dei. I was told not to worry: “You now have the grace of state. All will be well.”

Hearing the weekly ‘confidence’, as spiritual direction was then called, meant asking how the Norms and Customs were being lived. A tick box quantitative rather than qualitative enquiry on how a Numerary or Supernumerary actually felt.

I got on with it. Emotional coercion usually did the trick. My charges tried to do better before the next session. With hindsight, my efforts certainly saddled the Holy Spirit with lots to do. *‘Ecclesia supplet’* the ‘church supplies’ what I could not offer.

Years later, after I had left Opus Dei, I realised that I had not been a mentor. Mentors are different from what I had been doing. I had not been offering advice to help those members develop their spiritual skills and their relationships with God.

I had been more of a train driver's inspector, urging them to keep on keeping on along that Norms and Customs railway track.

"Which norm did you not perform? Why? How can you do better this coming week? How was your proselytism? Who new have you met?"

I knew no better. I did to others as I had been hitherto done to.

After leaving Opus Dei I developed my own way of carrying out spiritual guidance through a technique I called PIES. This involved asking each 'client' on how they were doing on the Physical, Intellectual, Emotional and Spiritual components of their lives. This approach looks at the whole human being, and asks challenging questions requiring self-reflection, above all calling for honesty.

In 1962, on my way to a meeting with Opus Dei members in Manchester, my motorbike finally croaked.

I arrived at Lapwing House, a small Opus Dei house for Numeraries in Didsbury, pushing Gladys; that 125cc BSA Bantam I had bought with money which, aged 16, I had earned working pre-Christmas for the Post Office.

Second-hand, it cost just £30. Mind you, I had been earning just 3 shillings and 3d, old pence, per hour. (Moreover, as one pound was then divided into 20 shillings, it took me around six hours to earn one pound.)

I loved that bike. It gave me freedom and cheap mobility. On the back seat I had fitted, I had carried Daddy to his work at Bush House and the BBC Czechoslovak service, and my sisters to their meetings and rendezvous.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, to pick me up, I was offered a nice cup of tea; well a mug actually.

Ron, an outstanding facial surgeon Numerary I had met on our annual courses, reached out to get a bottle of milk from the windowsill. He poured its contents into my mug. My second nasty surprise that day. The contents were not milk but latex-glue, which instantly congealed.

Years later, Ron, (Ronald P Winstanley 1924-2020) and I would install central heating in the Women's Section house at Wickenden Manor. All that bending and welding of copper tubing, as well as that latex glue, are etched into my memory.

With no further surprises that day, except that the train back to London was on time, I arrived at Euston sitting in the luggage van on the floor next to Gladys. Soon, Opus Dei bought a red 150cc Lambretta scooter which became my new steed.

In the winter of 1963, we had a real pea-souper smog. Riding, very slowly along the North Circular on my new Gladys, I followed the rear lights of a column of cars. As they slowed down, I gradually overtook them.

Then they slowly stopped. I carried on until, on what turned out to be a side road, I reached the end of the line. The front garden of a house. The row of drivers, imagining the car in front would keep on along the main road, had ended up head to tail along a side street.

The adventure taught me two things. One. A two-seater may be uncomfortable, even in winter painful, but it offers flexibility. Easy to turn around and pass a line of stationary cars. Two. Never assume the persons ahead know where they are going.

In 1964, on the 13 June, my younger sister Georgie married John Moffett. I gave her away. The lovely day was tainted by a sadness. Jarmila my older sister, was not able to be with us. However, I felt doubly proud. I felt proud of Georgie and proud, as with Georgie on my arm, I walked her down the aisle wearing my deceased father's morning coat.

My contact with Netherhall Hall suppliers was an education. One chap specialized in Roman Catholic Tea. Another claimed his USP was the fact that he was a Catholic Drain Cleaner, with an arm's-length of references from monasteries, convents and schools. It may have been my hard heart, or, maybe, suspicion of their ambitious quotes, that made me turn them down.¹

Every summer from 1960 to 1965 I would be invited to spend time with The Father. On his way back to Rome, I would sit next to him in the back of the car as he was driven to Southend airport where in those days they ran a flying ferry to France.

In 1965, as he was leaving England for the last time, The Father invited me to the house where he was staying and offered me a whiskey. (I was not going to drive!) And we set off. He and I were as usual seated in the back of the MG saloon I had so carefully cleaned and polished the day before. Don Alvaro, the Regional Counsellor and driver were up front.

In 1962, I cannot remember why, he showed me how his cassock pocket worked. He showed me how he could either reach the cassock pocket or through it go to his trouser pocket. Don Alvaro, who in London rarely left his side, laughed and offered me a cigarette.

In the summer of 1964, after I had paid him a compliment, The Father said and then wrote his first word to me, *Pelotillero*, Spanish for crawler.

1. Years later, while I was responsible for electrical repairs at the Roman College of Opus Dei, a friendly electrician, over a glass of Campari Soda - shared with me that he would get back to me as soon as he had dismantled two hundred (sic 200!) circulating pumps. An 'expert consultant' had convinced the Reverend mother and her Bursar that their Convent needed all these to improve their central heating. "One at every radiator should do the trick." Those poor sisters must have been as innocent as doves, and not much wiser. As soon as one pump burnt out, the whole convent turned cold.

On the way to Southend Airport, The Father started to sing, “*Capullico, capullico*” – about a rose bud turning into a rose. He seemed encouraged by what he had seen in London. He seemed to think that Opus Dei in the UK was ready for take-off. Vocations were growing, and staying. He saw me as a sign of things to come.

At Netherhall House, I organized lectures so that business, commerce and industry leaders could be invited. Lord Beeching’s lecture was entitled “Will training make the railways fit?” (Sorry about that.) I was doing all I could to help Opus Dei flourish.

To spread the word and proselytize, I started circles, or spiritual instruction sessions, around London; as far afield as King’s College Hospital and even Blackheath.

Heady days. I felt I was doing something seriously important. Time flew by as I focused on living the spirit of Opus Dei as perfectly as I could, recruiting Numeraries and Supernumeraries and translating, with the help of my mother, The Father’s “*Camino*”, “The Way”, into Czech.

On 27 December 1963, while I was at my Director’s desk, Mr Sherrington, a headmaster at Middlesbrough, came on the line. He wanted to speak to his son Philip who had told him was going on a study course at Netherhall. I said I would try to find him.

From the Regional Commission’s office, I learned that Phil was actually on a Numerary retreat in Manchester. He had not told his family that he had joined Opus Dei so I was directed to tell his father that, as Netherhall had had problems with the central heating, Phil was actually on that study course at Grandpont House, Oxford. Living the virtue of obedience, this I did.

On the retreat in that Grandpont House in January 1963, the coldest winter for more than 200 years, there was no heating upstairs. I remember how I had to do serious squats and press-ups before slipping into my freezing bed to fall asleep. Then, when taking my morning shower, it was essential to turn the tap off every half a minute so that I could get my chest muscles to work and draw a breath.

Despite that cold winter, I loved Grandpont House. Even before joining Opus Dei, I used to ride Gladys from Dulwich along the A40 to Oxford. No M40 in those days.

When not working on painting and electrics, I would spend many a happy hour punting along the Isis and up the Cherwell.

During the winter of 1962-1963, known as the “Big Freeze of 1963”, as the regular fuses kept blowing, to keep the Netherhall House bedrooms warm by electric fires, I ended up using nails in the main fuse-box. Once winter had

turned to spring, I was able to replace these with proper fuses and seal it all back to normal before any inspector came around.

During that mini-ice, when riding my scooter, even with thick mittens on, my fingers soon got so cold that I could not bring my little finger close to the others. A couple of times, as soon as I got home, I needed to take lengthy, deep warm bath so I could cease shivering.

From the inside of a cult or sect, the world outside is like a photographic negative of reality as perceived by the rest of the world. Inside Opus Dei, the paramount virtues were whole-hearted, uncritical obedience and annihilation of personal feeling and tastes; all for the benefit of the Institution.

So it seemed quite natural to have all of the letters sent to me read by my Director before I could see them, to use friendship as a bait for possible vocations and to never sleep in my family home.

It seemed fine, natural even, to cut contact with anyone who left 'The Work'. Though physically in the world like any lay person, we lived a cultural, intellectual, emotional and spiritual monasticism for the greater glory of God, and of course for our sanctity.

Books, above all religious and theological publications and TV channels, as well as newspapers (which included the Vatican's *Osservatore Romano*) were censored.

With hindsight, there are no two ways about it; while in Opus Dei I behaved like a holier-than-thou prig. After I was allowed to leave Opus Dei in 1982, my older sister Jarmila reminded me how in 1963 I had sent her a terrible letter condemning her for planning to marry a divorced man, Jiří Veltruský, aka Paul Barton.

Whilst in Geneva, in the visitors' gallery while Paul was the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) delegate to the UN attending a meeting of the Economic and Social Council, she told me how she had read in my letter: "If you have any children, they will be bastards in the sight of God."

When, on the 22 November in New York, shortly after they had married, she heard that "He has been shot." What a relief for her it was to find out it was only JFK and not her Paul.

Having forgotten/blocked-out this letter, for years I could not understand why Paul would not speak with me. However, from 1978 onwards, as I started to stop-off in Paris to see my sister on my way through with mini-buses full of lads from our Netherhall Boys Club, our relationship began to improve.

Towards the end of his life, once I had left Opus Dei and we used to stay up late enjoying his whiskey, we developed an agreeable relationship. He realised that, after all, we had a lot in common. Soon after he died on 31 May 1994, I took his funeral and cremation ceremony in Paris.

In May 1963 I was in Italy on an international conference held at Villa Falconieri, Frascati, just south of Rome, a RUI (*Residenze Universitarie Italiani*), the Italian version of Netherhall Educational Association.

On my way there, it seemed a good use of my time to visit a couple of erstwhile Netherhall residents, now studying for the priesthood in Rome at The Venerabile Colegio Inglese.

I remember that they had to follow very strict rules. These included:

1. To ask the Rector for permission to go outside.
2. To go out in groups of three.
3. They had to wear their cassocks.

Two years later, (by then I was at the Opus Dei Roman College), these same seminarians were allowed to go out on their own, dressed in civvies, without telling anyone. Not surprisingly, quite a few could not hack the change and left their priestly studies, seduced by freedom and Rome's Dolce Vita. Their vocation had been built on sand and was easily swept away by sex.

Chapter Two

Rome. 1965-1969

1965: Monday 13 September was a crucial day for me. I was informed that The Father had invited me to come to The Roman College. Having completed my studies of philosophy on our Summer Courses in Gort Ard, I was to study theology, get my doctorate and, perhaps, become ordained priest.

Though I had never wanted to be a priest, as it was God's will, I set out joyfully excited. To avoid an embarrassing send-off farewell, instead of leaving Netherhall House via the front door besieged by people wanting to make sure I was indeed departing, I climbed out of the ground-floor window. Then I got into the car that I had previously loaded with a massive suitcase packed with stuff Opus Dei HQ wanted from England and was driven to Victoria Station.



On my way by train to Rome, September 1965

The journey took me by train to Folkestone, by ferry to Boulogne, then by train to Paris, Paris to Milan and finally from Milan to Rome.

On the train from Milan, I had a very agreeable surprise. Two complete strangers shared their lunch with me and took my photograph. As I alighted in Rome and left them on their way to Sicily, they asked me for my address. As I had not asked them for their address, I was unable thank them for the photo they sent me. An enduring regret.

Soon after my arrival in Rome in the autumn of 1965, I caught the tail end of Vatican II. Before it ended on 8 December, I was able to help Don

Alvaro, then Secretary General of Opus Dei and working at the Vatican Council to sort out a batch of votes/suggestions *juxta modum* of the document that came out on 18 November as 'Vatican II Apostolicam Actuositatem: On the apostolate of the Laity'. This was a document of great interest to the leadership of Opus Dei.

Very soon after I arrived in Rome, I experienced clear evidence of being *el mimado* del Padre, The Father's favourite. He proudly showed me round areas of Villa Tevere, the Opus Dei HQ, that were out-of-bounds to other students. I became familiar with his chapel, bedroom, sitting rooms and corridors with their fresco painted walls.

I soon spotted how he sensed he was a conduit for God's ideas. Whenever a thought came into his mind, he would pause and write into his little pocket book for further use.

Once we had settled into life in The Roman College, to test our commitment, new arrivals were given menial tasks. My responsibility was filthy: cleaning the central-heating boilers and boiler room with short and very long brushes. I needed a shower after each session of this sweaty endeavour.

Having passed the test, I was asked to go and work in the Architect's Office, where The Father used to spend a lot of time. Subsequently I learned that he had asked Jesus Gazapo, Opus Dei's chief architect who ran that office, to invite me to work there.

Soon, they discovered that I was competent at drawing and water colouring. Consequently, I spent many hours a week working in that office, which was air-conditioned to prevent the architectural drawing papers expanding in the heat. Often, after office hours, it was just me with The Father watching me draw or watercolour.

Once when I was there alone with him, The Father, taking a telephone call, lost his temper. Someone had not done what he had demanded. As soon as he had put the phone down, he turned to me and said: "When I am dead and they ask you how the Father was, tell them that he knew how to laugh and to shout." He then gave me un abrazo, a big hug.

He also knew how to give a hefty kick on a door when it had not been opened for him on his way from the Roman College to his apartments. (I was reminded of this when, years later; I watched a similar scene in 'The Key' episode of 'Yes, Prime Minister')

Soon after this, when we were alone in the *Soggiorno*, a large sitting room/lounge, by the glass-cased model of the ship that had brought him to Rome, he said to me that the trouble with so many biographies of saints was that they air-brushed out their weaknesses. He hoped that in his case it would not happen. Of course, it did.

Knowing no Italian, very little Spanish but with a smattering of 'O' Level Latin, I decided to learn four Spanish and four Italian words a day.

I concentrated on what I heard and read. This included Lateran university lectures in Latin, relaxation in *tertulias* (family get-togethers), mealtimes in Spanish and RAI TV and films in Italian.

Some of the best nights of sleep I have ever had were in those first four months in Rome. Every night I fell asleep the moment my head touched the pillow. I slept right through until reveille. I was utterly knackered. Languages were my narcotic.

Then suddenly, as though an Epiphany had taken over, I found I could speak Spanish fluently. Some sort of inner quantum leap had taken place. My Spanish was fluent but full of grammatical and pronunciation mistakes.

As Providence would have it, I shared a room (we slept in bunk beds) with three Spanish lads, one of whom was Iñaki, a delightful, tough Basque taskmaster. Iñaki decided he was going to take me under his wing to *perfeccionar* mi Castellano (improve my Spanish).

Whenever I opened my mouth to speak Spanish, he responded instantly with a '*no entiendo*' (I don't understand), until I got the grammar perfect and the pronunciation approximately correct.

Playing with my tongue, face and neck muscles, I gradually got it right. Slowly, I did indeed *perfeccionar* my Spanish. Exhausting but worth it. My Italian took a wee bit longer and, I was told, I spoke it with a Spanish accent.

I soon learned the traps lying in wait on the frontiers between similar languages. In Spanish *pisar* means to tread. In Italian, it means to piss. Imagine the scene. An Italian workman, on his knees repairing a terrazzo floor, suddenly hears a voice. Standing next to him is an immaculately dressed Spanish Numerary. "*Scusi, può pisare qui?*" The man turns his head sideways and replies "*Ma, proprio qui?*" "You mean, right here?"

In Spanish *lujuria* means lust and thus is a serious sin, not 'luxury' in English that need not be one.

An American, who had repaired a WC, placed a notice on the door saying, "*No usar por placer*". It was bound to elicit a guffaw or at least a grin. Meaning to say, "Please do not use" it actually states, "Do not use for pleasure", as though any Numerary ever would.

"*Estoy constipado*" in Spanish means "I have a cold; a blocked nose", nothing to do with the other end of the body. A woman who claims to be "*embarazada*" is not feeling awkward, but rather pregnant, and so on.

Four years of living cheek by jowl with a very cosmopolitan group of students taught me how different temperaments and cultures from around Europe and Latin America could mutually enrich and also confuse each other. When in Rome I learned how loquacity, emotionalism, reticence, physicality in slapping backs and hugging vary around the globe.

In 1965 not long after he had been exiled to Rome, I met Cardinal Josef Beran (1888-1969). I was moved almost to tears when he told me how a Czechoslovak Government minister who had shared his Dachau concentration camp cell carried his suitcase onto the plane. Love, with its respect and appreciation, had not been corroded by political enmities.

During the evening *tertulia* of 30 June 1966, I was asked to go down to the telephone in the entrance hall of Bruno Buozzi 75, the Opus Dei seminary in Rome.

It was my sister Jarmila. "Johnny is dead" she said. "Johnny who?", I replied. I had had no inkling that my younger brother John had been unwell. He had been taken to hospital and had died during the operation to remove a "benign" (I hate that word - it's like 'friendly fire') brain tumour.

Shocked, I went straight to Don Iñaki Celaya, The Rector. He telephoned The Father who immediately asked me to come through. "Your mother will need you, won't she?" "Yes", I replied. As though by magic I was booked onto a flight to London early the next day.

The Alitalia plane had just three passengers, with twice as many staff to look after us. I was told the plane would fill up on its onward flight to New York from London. Shocked by Johnny's death, life seemed unreal. I became an existentialist; living in the instant-present to get through the day. An experience that turned out to be helpful when, as chaplain at a secondary school, I encountered and was able to empathise with grief-stricken families.

Picked up at Heathrow by a Numerary, I was taken to Kelston, the Opus Dei house on Nightingale Lane, Balham. In those days, to prevent them becoming emotionally attached to their family rather than The Work, Numeraries were not allowed to stay with their parents.

Therefore, every morning after breakfast I had to drive to Bromley in Kent and then to drive back to Kelston for dinner. Like all Numeraries, I had to take Lk14, 26 and Mt 10, 37 very seriously indeed. For the sake of The Kingdom, we had to "hate our family". Though at the time I accepted this as a part of my vocation, once I left The Work it felt like a very fundamentalist reading of the New Testament.

As soon as Johnny, who like our father, was buried in Streatham Cemetery, I was booked onto the next available flight back to Rome. In those days, my mind was able to override my feelings. I now know I must have been in internal lockdown as soon afterwards I rediscovered my old excruciating back pain. Sciatica.

Never far below the surface, it would reappear repeatedly until I left Opus Dei. (Mind you, even in 2023, I can still feel my sciatic nerve – occasionally itching down on my right foot, the second smallest toe.)

Once a week, I seem to remember it was a Wednesday, there were no weekday morning lectures at The Roman College. We could play football or go for a walk. Initially I played football. Then I started to peruse books about art and Rome that were plentiful in our in-house library. As I had been banned from singing in small groups, "Your voice gives everyone the giggles", I had extra time for reading to catch up on artists and architecture. Methodically, I began to explore Rome.

It was customary for students at The Roman College to take their summer holidays at the Opus Dei centre at Salto di Fondi, Terracina, on the coast of Anzio, south of Rome. I responded to the beauty of the sea, the sky and the mountains by writing poetry. Little did I know that just four years after I had left Rome, poems would be my lifeline to sanity,

At Terracina I discovered that in April and May, oranges picked off the tree were delicious. That it was possible to walk barefoot on sunbaked sand by kicking into it sharply on my way to the sea. And how disgusting life becomes when food-poisoning sweeps through the whole community and every WC has a long 2.00am queue, in various stages of agony and the only thing to do is let nature take its course in the bushes. No matter what.

Accompanied by Flavio Cappucci, an Italian who had come a year earlier to Netherhall to study English, I learnt that it was possible to hire a large TV screen to watch the 1966 World Cup.

Though being the first Opus Dei Czechoslovak Numerary, and thus terribly important, for me as a Brit it was lovely to bask in the glory of England's win and be able to pity poor (West) Germany who came second, yet again as in 1918 and 1945.

Flavio, whom I used to address as Flappucci, accompanied me just before we left for Salto di Fondi, to buy me a pair of swimming trunks. Waiting to be served, we spoke in English. When eventually the assistant brought a pair and stated the price, Flappucci exploded, in Italian. The man mumbled, in Italian, "But I thought you were English" and cut the price by exactly a half. I was learning not just Italian but Italesque.

Strange how things turn out. Years later, by then a Monsignor, Flavio Cappucci was appointed Promoter of the Cause of Beatification for Escrivá.

I was there with The Father in the architect's office, when in 1968, the first photos of the shaving of the top of the hill to create the esplanade that would carry the Torreciudad Shrine arrived. The construction of this Marian shrine was a project dear to The Father's heart. If you Google 'Torreciudad' you will see why. He inaugurated it a short time before he died.

Another of The Father's keen interests was Tor D'Aveia International Centre, the summer seat of the Roman College of the Holy Cross, located in San Felice D'Ocre, in the Abruzzi Mountains near L'Aquila.

It was purchased (I seem to remember in 1965) to replace the accommodation at Terracina. The coast had become commercialised, with too much female flesh on show. Besides, the mountains were cooler and far more secluded.

Before starting at The Lateran University to get my STL, 1965-1967, and then the doctorate, from 1967-1969, I took many car trips there with Jesus Gazapo. Gradually a massive perimeter wall was built and the house radically refurbished. It was fun; the drive went through great scenery and the work was creatively satisfying.

I felt appreciated and one of the inner circle. Jesus Gazapo soon realised that I was rather good at 'electrics'.

The light above the altar in The Father's chapel, where there was always a bottle of Yardley eau de cologne, was now deemed inadequate. I was asked to enhance it. To do this, I needed to access wiring. I soon discovered that the architectural electric circuit drawing was erroneous.

Consequently, The Father asked me to verify the accuracy of the circuit drawings around the whole of the Opus Dei Roman College. It took ages. Whenever I was in the women's section I had, of course, to be accompanied by a priest from the General Council to make sure I behaved myself! Gradually, I upgraded all the drawings. As a result, I had been in all the rooms of the Opus Dei HQ.

When the women's section house in Castel Gandolfo had a problem with its loudspeaker system in the auditorium, accompanied by another priest from the General Council, I spent a morning fixing that.

Having been put in charge of electrical maintenance, to buy bits of equipment I was allowed to use one of the Lambrettas and even the Fiat 600. One day, waiting at a red light, the car behind me hooted and a hand out of the window waved me to get moving. I did. In my rear-mirror, I saw a police car.

When next I bumped into the Rector, I shared with him my feelings of surprise. "Oh, Vlad! In Italy, the lights are made for man, not man for the lights."

Suddenly, the penny dropped. No wonder The Vatican could promulgate so many rules and regulations on liturgy and church matters. They were more a statement of intent, motivational rather than apodictic or mandatory.

Some 15 years later in early 1982, The Vatican stated that only precious metal chalices should be used at Mass. However, on 29 May 1982, at the Wembley Stadium Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II, all the chalices were ceramic. No worries.



At the Roman College of the Holy Cross, the Opus Dei HQ and seminary, with my mother in May 1968

In 1968, *Humane Vitae* had just appeared and was a hot topic for debate; worth a special course of lectures. To me the lectures seemed anodyne and orthodox. Apparently not. One Tuesday we discovered that the lecturer had been re-located, appointed Archbishop in some tiny mountain town in central Italy. Promoted out of danger to seminarians, his views would no longer be heard in Rome. Interesting, as the Chinese would say, the ways of The Vatican.

Faced with my STL exam, a sort of BA that consisted of viva-voce questionings on everything in theology, I had a panic attack. How could I know everything about everything? Then a comforting notion slipped into my mind. Last year, all the Opus Dei students passed. They were no smarter than I was. It must be possible. Indeed, it was.

In my final year at the Roman College I was selected to be, first the Secretary and then the Director of one of the local Opus Dei councils. These were groups of some twenty students into which the occupants of the Roman College were divided.

In that role, I learned why, soon after my arrival in Bruno Buozzi I had had that mucky job in the boiler room. I was told that in bullfights the bull had to be weakened, reduced to his knees, if it was to be controlled and mastered before being slain. We were told we had “The right to have no rights.”

Interesting, with hindsight, the Opus Dei pedagogy. The perfect Numerary was to be an unquestioning cog in the apostolic machine under the control of The Father and his team.

By the time I left Rome, my Italian was efficient and my Spanish more or less perfect. My Latin was usable as it had to be for my first theology degree and then research for my (in English) DD on “The Relationship between Creation and Redemption in Vatican II”.

I use DD even though the degree is officially STD because when I started teaching at The Cardinal Vaughan School in 1973, those initials were deemed by many to mean Sexually Transmitted Disease.

Depressed by the Second Vatican Council and the policies of Pope Paul VI, from 1965 The Father progressively showed symptoms of clinical depression; insomnia at night, drowsiness during the day.

To while away the hours, often alone, sometimes with Don Javi Echevarria, his PA, and even with Don Álvaro, the Secretary General who in those days smoked cigarettes, The Father would invite and watch me assemble, wire up and hang Venetian Glass chandeliers in the halls and rooms that had finally been completed in the Opus Dei HQ. Men on Vialle Bruno Buozzi 73-75 (BB73), women just round the corner in Villa Sacchetti (VS).

The Father would get Jesus Gazapo to drive us down to the second-hand religious art shops so that together we could ‘rescue’ artefacts that “in the spirit of Vatican II” with its “return to the sources and minimize the use of artefacts” had been discarded from churches around Rome.

Even now, I clearly remember carrying home a baby Jesus with a severely tonsured head, probably from a monastery or friary Christmas crib. Using plastic wood, I built his hair up and, encouraged by The Father, transported him for the following Christmas up to Tor d'Aveia, the Opus Dei house in the Abruzzi mountains.

The Father trusted me and relied on me. My engineering training, and running Netherhall House, had equipped me with a useful set of skills.

Surrounded by a bubble of affection, I was utterly uncritical. It seemed perfectly normal to install a microphone behind a picture in an interview room so that every word uttered there could be taped for posterity and a record kept of who said what.

I felt rather special, honoured even, being allowed to wrestle Javi, then The Father's Personal Secretary and together with Don Alvaro his Guardian Angel, down to the carpet. There the Father could smear his face with the perfume placed in bowls to disguise the smell of coffee used to age, the word I believe is 'distress', the new sofas in the recently re-chandeliered salons.

Alongside my work in the architect's office and my studies, I became the Father's simultaneous translator for the Anglophones.

One lunchtime, taking Archbishop Derek Warlock up the stairs past the garage doors (which had suddenly swung open) he turned to one of his entourage with, "I wonder what he has in his garage!" I stayed schtum and we carried on up the stairs.

Why should he know about the fine air-conditioned Merc, a Fiat 600, a VW van and a few scooters? On the back of the May '68 riots in France, to frustrate any truck trying to crash through, the steel garage doors had been seriously reinforced.

After rain, scooters, I swiftly learned the hard way, needed to be treated with great respect. Traction on Rome's wet tramlines and manhole covers was practically non-existent. Luckily, while still in London, I had skidded a couple of times and learned how to let go of a scooter so it could slide free. Thus, my leg survived my Roman rides.

The circulare tram for two years took me on weekdays from Parioli to the Lateran, a fond memory. How warm and friendly on a tram some Roman folk can be! My own experience was backed up by a bright but somewhat absent-minded Numerary we had nicknamed *Il filosofo*.

One post-prandial tertulia he recounted his morning experience. "I was sitting on the tram reading my book when a lady tapped me on the shoulder and asked, 'Am I old enough to be your mother?' I looked up at her face and replied 'Yes. I think so.' With a gentle smile, she whispered, 'Well, in that case, your fly-buttons are undone.'" How sensitive and caring! Emotional keyhole surgery.

In the early 1960s together with my mother I had translated "The Way", the Father's 999 points to ponder, a sort of Opus Dei Bible or Qur'an, into Czech. Now, prior to the Soviet invasion of 1968, things in Czechoslovakia, thanks to the reforming President Dubček, seemed to be moving in a positive direction. The Father asked me to get it published.

At the Czech seminary, the Pontificio Collegio Neppomuccno on Via Concordia, I had learned that in Norcia, a monastery of Czech-refugee Benedictines who had escaped from behind the Iron Curtain, had set up a printing press. Therefore, in 1967, to Norcia I went.

I drove to Assisi, parked the car at the station and took the narrow-gauge railway up through the hills to what, I suspect, must be one of the smallest dioceses in the world. Apart from the monastery outside the city walls, there were just four churches, one of them closed. A total of four priests; one of them the diocesan Bishop.

By the time I went again, the railway was closed. A landslide had taken out a section of the track. And that was that. My next trip had to be all the way by car.

On my way there, I managed to squeeze in a fair bit of Assisi sightseeing. When I eventually mentioned this to The Rector, he was not best pleased. He told me not to tell the lads. "Sightseeing was a waste of valuable time." Of course, he was right. It had not been my day-off.

With hindsight, it showed how controlling the Opus Dei hierarchy was and how controlled we all were. Though ad nauseam denied by Opus Dei, it was run like any strict religious institution. At the time, as I lacked knowledge of any other religious organisation, it seemed fine. Par for the course.

For the last two years of my stay in Rome, The Father used to ask me to sit next to him, and nudge him awake whenever he dozed off watching the censorship-preview and then the plenary projection of the 16mm films the Roman College enjoyed twice a week.

During the interval of one of these previews, the film was one of those wartime hate-the-Nazis productions, as usual The Father and I went outside the Opus Dei cinema room and sat down together. I lit a cigarette. (Male Numeraries were encouraged to smoke to show we were macho. Later, as part of our pastoral training, we were told that offering a cigarette was a great way to break the ice.)

The Father, sitting in front of me, took my hand and said, "You know, Vlad, Hitler could not have been as bad as people say he was. He could not have killed six million Jews. It could not have been more than two or three million."

At the time, I refused to be shocked. I said nothing. Just held his hand. We went back into the auditorium. I thought that he was a child of his times. For him Hitler had enabled General Franco to win the Civil War and save the Catholic Church in his native land.

But many years later I tried to postpone his canonisation because I did not think his views on Hitler fitted the job description of a saint who would be seen as a role model. Alas, to no avail. The Opus Dei canon lawyers in the Vatican stated that testimonies of all who had left Opus Dei were to be set aside and ignored as they were bound to be biased. My document, as were the testimonies of María del Carmen Tapia and Dr. John Roche, was ignored. Those canon lawyers at The Vatican certainly knew their tricks.



My ordination to the priesthood, 31 August 1969

Later on, as part of our final pre-ordination formation, early members of Opus Dei told us about life in Spain in the late 1930s. For them, Hitler had saved Catholicism in Spain. How could he have turned out to be such a grotesque monster?

I cannot remember why, I think it was in 1967, I was recruited to help set up CRIS: Centro Romano di Incontri Sacerdotali. I was proud of being involved. This centre, overtly there to nurture the spiritual life of seminarians and clergy in Rome, and to warn the clergy of the damage that was being done to the Church by all that was going on in The Vatican after the end of Vatican II, had a covert motivation behind its foundation.

CRIS was a platform to which top prelates from around the world, on their visit to The Vatican, would be invited to give a lecture. One of these was Karol Józef Wojtyła.

Wojtyła's election as Pope on 16 October 1978 was, thanks to CRIS, a massive blessing for Opus Dei. For the newly elected John Paul II, the Jesuits, thanks to their involvement in Latin America's Liberation Theology had become too left wing. Whom could he trust and rely on? Opus Dei of course! At CRIS, he had picked up its views on communism and the role of women. They resonated with his. To help him learn Spanish, he took many a breakfast with an Opus Dei priest.

Opus Dei's leadership came ever closer to the Pope, playing an increasing number of roles in The Vatican. In 1978, The Institute for the Works of Religion, commonly known as the Vatican Bank, was Banco Ambrosiano's main shareholder and had a cash-flow problem. Opus Dei was able to sort it out.

Not surprisingly, when Opus Dei wanted to obtain a canonisation for its Founder, the process was fast-tracked through The Vatican. CRIS had achieved an outstanding success that was crystal-clear to all in Opus Dei.

In the summer of 1968, I was allowed to stay in Rome to work on my thesis. I realised why Rome empties in August. The *ferro-agosto* heat made sleep well-nigh impossible. On more than one night, I needed to take two cold showers. Just one was not enough to prevent me sweating. Sweat kept me awake.

One memorable night, by now in my final year and thus sleeping in a single room, I woke up. A bat was circling around my room. I attempted to swat it out through the window with a rolled-up towel.

After a couple of failed tries, I over did it. Swinging my towel with a fast bowler's action, I swiped myself where cricketers wear their box. Right. That was it. I closed the window. I smacked the poor pipistrello to the floor and dispatched it with the sharp end of a theology book. I then I hung it from the middle of the window frame. No further intruders appeared.

In early 1969, Iñaki, the Rector, informed me that I was to be ordained priest in August. I wrote to my mother. She hurried over to Rome. Her meeting with The Father lasted well over half an hour. His secretary, who knocked to inform us that there was another appointment, was twice told to leave us alone. My mother beamed bliss.

She was given a fine, bronze medallion, three inches in diameter. Whether this helped or whether it was my imminent ordination that changed her heart and mind, she soon started to go to daily Mass at St Joseph's, her local church in Bromley. She even became a Third Order Carmelite, often visiting 'Friars', the Aylesford Priory.

Coming towards the end of my doctoral thesis, I learned a lesson that would stand me in good stead when, years later, I was applying for a Lottery Grant. Always accept the advice of an expert.

When Mgr. Vladimir Boublik, the Dean of the Theology Faculty at the Lateran University, read through my first draft, he suggested some radical changes. It meant the total restructuring of the chapters. Initially I balked at the thought. Then I knuckled down. Though it meant a lot of work, it was worth it.

Defending my thesis, I was asked what I thought creation actually meant. I replied "production *ex nihilo*. That is why cardinals are deemed to be created." The panel of three fell about laughing and give me top marks: "*Summa cum laude*".

Researching the Vatican II documents for my thesis had been a lot of fun. Holding in my hands one of just three carbon copies of a draft document sent a shiver up my spine. Walking down motorway-size corridors to meet a Cardinal in his hanger-sized Palazzo Room to obtain his permission to access a couple of draft documents of *Gaudium et Spes* was exciting.

Wading through my file of "6x4" index cards with their quotations was for me a chore. However, without me having a clue then, the meticulous routine of organizing concepts into an ordered shape, turned out to be excellent training for setting up YAP – the Young Adults Pilgrimage to Lourdes, the SPECs and the two diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes for the Diocese of Westminster. (Full details in part three of *A Journey to Eternity*.)

The day before I left Rome for Spain and ordination to the priesthood, the Father took me, just me, in his chauffeur driven car around Rome to say farewell to the important sights. We parked for quite a while in St Peter's square. He said it was not a farewell but *hasta la proxima, à bientôt* He said he meant it.

The rest of the lads had gone by train but "as you have worked so hard", The Father said, I was to go by plane. First to Barcelona. There, so I could to drive to Pamplona to see a back specialist about my sciatica at its Opus Dei University Medical School, I was able to borrow a Seat 600 car.

Thanks to flying rather than going by train, I had time on my hands. I decided to go via Barbastro to see The Father's house and Torreciudad, whose construction I had monitored in the architect's office.

At Pamplona, the surgeon examined me and said he would see me after the ordination. Back in Barcelona after my ordination and my first Mass at Netherhall House, I was advised not to let that '*cuchillo facil*' (easy knife) touch me. I took the advice. As it turned out, a wise decision.

The final preparation for ordination was a heady time. I had left Rome on 29 July and by 31 August I had been tonsured and received all the minor and major orders.

In Madrid, we spent an evening at the *Parque de Atracciones*, the city's fun fair. We had buckets of free tokens from the owner, a Supernumerary member of Opus Dei.

We watched the landing on the moon on television even though we were then in the middle of our final pre-ordination silent retreat.

Another pre-ordination incident was my inadvertent driving of a stolen car for some eight hours. To enable four of us to discover Madrid, a Numerary who worked in a Madrid office said that as he did not need it during office hours, we could borrow his car, a green Renault.

At his office, I picked up the keys and with three other ordinands climbed into a green Renault just down the road. And off I drove.

Late that afternoon, it seemed only fair to replace the petrol we had used, so I pulled up at a petrol station. However, horror of horrors, the petrol cap key did not fit.

Having parked the car, I went up into our Numerary friend's office and came clean. "Oh, dear" he said, "I forgot to mention I had parked my car around the corner."

All day, four Deacons had been driving around Madrid in a stolen car. Being the gentleman that I then was, I left a note under the windscreen of our borrowed car. With deep apologies, I left a telephone number. However, no one contacted me.

In Madrid, I was reminded of a human trait that had given me twinges while still in Rome. How swiftly luxuries and treats become normality. Privileges morph to rights.

Brandy with after-lunch coffee, which had been a real treat when it first appeared, was suddenly, without warning (why should there have been a warning?) no longer there. I felt empty, glum. In that postprandial tertulia the voices of all the twenty-nine ordinands flipped from major to minor.

Years later, I experienced something similar with Cardinal Basil Hume. Somehow, I assumed he would be there forever. It was shock when in the spring of 1999 he discovered he was indeed ill and died just three months later on 17 June.

Although Opus Dei was far from easy, thanks to its cultural monasticism, I survived the 1960s. Not just the Catholic post-Vatican II times, but also the secular sex, drugs and rock and roll and all that, which decimated many religious orders.

My faith, with a solid grounding in traditional, Tridentine Thomistic theology, untainted by Descart and post-Descartian philosophies, stood intact. A sound skeleton on which, once I had left Opus Dei, I would be able to add spiritual sinews, muscles and flesh: a spirituality alive with the Blessed Trinity: *Abba*, *Yeshua*, *Ruach*: always present in the present of the present wherever I found myself.

Chapter Three

Fledging Priesthood. 1969-1973

1969 was the cusp of liturgical change. Within months of my ordination, the Tridentine Mass, which I had memorized over a number of mornings standing up to my neck in a Supernumerary's swimming pool, was replaced by what was then called *Missa Normativa* and which I had to learn on my return to London.

Staying at The Madrid Ritz, my mother, accompanied by Greville and Mary Howard (both members of the Church of England), were there at my ordination to the priesthood on 31 August 1969 in the Iglesia de la Santa Cruz, at Calle Atocha. I was one of 29 ordinands, two sons of whom were of Ministers in Franco's government. A splendid affair, followed by a delightful celebratory meal at which I raised a glass and called for a toast to all our mothers. This was joyfully accepted by all.

Next morning, she alone was the whole of the congregation at my first Mass. I felt thrilled, warm and joyful.

That afternoon she and I flew to Heathrow. Seated next to her in the plane, I silently thanked God for my ordination and his trust in me to give me Christ's power of attorney both legal and medical. From now on, whenever I heard confessions or celebrated Mass, I had "power of attorney for Christ". I would be acting in *persona Christi*. The thought warmed my heart to bursting point.



With my family outside Netherhall House in September 1969, after my first Solemn Mass

Mummy went to her home in Bromley, Kent, I to Netherhall House. There, on 7 September, I celebrated my first public Mass. This was attended by my mother, Georgina, my sister, and her husband John Moffett together with their children Robert, Catherine, Julia and John. Also present were our two cousins Anne-Marie Smith and Tricia Wright, daughters of my uncle Vladimir – always known as Ajik – Slavik.

My mother Georgina had two brothers: Vladimir and John. Thus, my brother was baptised John Vladimir. I, Vladimir John Antonin (after the Monsignor who baptised me, and died at Auschwitz) Vaclav (Patron Saint of Czechoslovakia, known in the UK as Wenceslaus).

Then it was back to Rome. Invited by The Father, even though I held no rank or managerial/hierarchic position, I attended the Special General Congress of Opus Dei. Overtly, in the light of Vatican II, it was meant to update The Work. Covertly it in fact approved everything the Father had done and was doing. I felt a sense of pride being there.

When the Congress ended, to gain six months of a broad and intense pastoral experience, I flew to Barcelona. Cramming up to three Masses and four Benedictions on a Sunday, preaching days of recollection and retreats, spending hours in the confessional, time flew by. Not surprisingly, my Spanish developed a Catalan accent, as was later commented on in London's Spanish restaurants.

I soon realised that a recently ordained priest had his cachet. Supernumeraries drove me around Cataluña. I got to know the Abbey of Monserrat, Our Lady of the Pillar in Zaragoza, many other towns and churches, as well as the developing building site at Torreciudad.

As The Father had promised, I was allowed to visit and explore Seville and Cordoba; purely as a tourist, for no pastoral purpose. I was well and truly recognized as *el mimado del Padre*.

In 1970, as I was leaving Rome after the Special General Congress, he had murmured: "*Doy gracias a Dios cada vez te veo.*" (I thank God every time I see you.)

On the flight from Heathrow, I was seated next to a rather swarthy, well-dressed man sporting a very expensive looking watch. Passing through a spot of serious turbulence, he suddenly turned, gripped my arm and with a thick accent demanded: "You are Catholic priest. No?" I said I was.

As you will never be able to identify him, I can disclose his concern. Having made a fortune in Hollywood by shortening the guts of stars who wanted to carry on eating as before yet gain no weight, he suddenly felt guilty and vulnerable.

Obesity had to do with calories consumed, metabolic rate, exercise and length of gut. He admitted he could not control the first three of these. But the fourth he certainly could, and did. Through his work he had irreversibly damaged the health of many. As he was clearly contrite, I forgave him all his sins.

On the Saturday after the Congress had ended, Inaki (not the Rector but, like me, the recently ordained priest who had taught me to speak Spanish) and I drove to The Vatican. We did so for a dare.

I drove. He sat in the back with the cardinal pink lining of a coat he had borrowed clearly visible. As soon as we reached the St Damascus Gate, I gave a short hoot on the horn. Out came a Swiss guard. He glanced into the car, went inside and, without a word, opened the gate, saluting us as we drove past.

Having parked, we took our time walking slowly round St Peter's. No one challenged us. We looked like two youngish Vatican civil service clerics. How security has changed.

Way back, as Netherhall House Director, *chutzpah* and a steady nerve had come in handy. Unable during afternoon visiting hours to see John Henry, a medical student Numerary at King's College Hospital (KCH) who had developed renal failure, I used to visit him in the mornings. To enable me, his Director, to take his 'confidence' and offer emotional support, John gave me his locker key.

In the locker room, I would take off my jacket, slip on his white coat, dangle his stethoscope out of my pocket and, with confident step, walk past Reception. On my third visit, the security guard touched his forehead with his finger. The trick is, never act furtively. In those days before security passes became the norm confidence was sufficient to project authenticity.

John had 'whistled', that is joined The Work, a few weeks before me and had invited me to come and give 'circles' (spiritual up-lifting sessions for potential members) at KCH. I knew the layout of the hospital, more or less. Just one mistake. Taking a wrong turn, I ended up in a nurses' changing room. Shocked faces. "Sorry! I am new here," precluded any further reactions from them.

Mind you, a few weeks later we had a slight hic-up. While I was by the side of John's bed, his Consultant, assuming that, as I was wearing a white coat, I was a medic of some sort, passed by. "Blood sample please, 25cc". Once he had moved on, with John's gingerly guidance, "Careful! If you pierce the artery you'll paralyze my arm", I took the sample, scrawled an illegible signature and gave it to a nurse. The crisis had passed "What crisis?" John nonchalantly pulled my leg.

In 1970, John Redvers Piggins, who, having been bullied for his surname changed his name to John Redvers once his children started going to school, came to see me at Netherhall House. Mary, his wife, was in hospital being, as he put it, 'tidied up' after the recent birth of their son, David. Years later, after John's death in 2017, Mary said that it had been an operation to cure her piles, her hemorrhoids,

John had come across Opus Dei while living and painting in Spain. He wanted to get the truth from the horse's mouth.

We hit it off. Mary and John had a flat around the corner from Finchley Road Underground station and we started to take weekly walks round Regents Park,

discussing Opus Dei and his recent-convert faith; we usually ended up with a pint of beer in a pub back on the Finchley Road.

As soon as their daughter Kate was born, they asked me to be her Godfather, Meg Reynolds being her Godmother. After they had moved to Upper Largo in Fife, where John found plenty of portraiture commissions, in 1978 Diana, a second daughter, arrived. A very pleasant surprise. To baptise her, I drove there with Johnny Wright, her Godfather, a born-again (in the evangelical sense) enthusiastic eccentric.

Once Mary's mother had died, the family moved to her home, Tweenhills Farm, Hartpury, Gloucestershire. Given the training in electrics I had picked up while in Rome, I was able to wire-up and bring light into the stables. That was a couple of decades before David transformed the whole complex into Tweenhills Farm & Stud, now the best Stud in the UK.

As Chaplain of Netherhall House, I was also chaplain to Lakefield Domestic Science School, attached to Netherhall. With its entrance around the corner, its inhabitants looked after all our domestic needs: cleaning, cooking and doing the laundry, all anonymously.

I threw myself into preparing homilies, talks and meditations. I delved into spiritual authors – as far as I was able. Thanks to The Father, Opus Dei subscribed to The Index of prohibited books. Catholic newspapers, even *The Osservatore Romano*, were beyond the pale. As were all scripture commentaries published after 1963.

Occasionally, I would accompany the Director as he went around to lock all the doors connecting Netherhall House to Lakefield. Each had to be double locked by two people, once on each side, to reduce the risk of that door being opened simultaneously on both sides and male and female Numeraries seeing each other.

At that time, this seemed fine. Life was full and fulfilling. Wanting to live life as an exemplary Numerary, I refused to consider being critical. God's will for me was channeled through Opus Dei and its rules and instructions. Giving my all, I felt I had received so much.

Around 1973 or maybe 1974, The Father ordered altars facing the people in our oratories to be removed. Netherhall House, completed just after Vatican II, with its altar facing the congregation, had been used to train diocesan clergy on how liturgy in that configuration could work. Now, because everyone else was doing it, we reversed to the old way. Facing east, priests celebrated Mass with their backs to the congregation.

Later on, I realised that Opus Dei was reactionary in a rather contrary way. Before Vatican II, we had altars facing the congregation with as much liturgy as possible in the vernacular. Now, like sailors tacking sharp lean out on the other side to prevent the boat turning over, to keep Peter's Boat steady as she goes, Opus Dei seemed to be doing the same.

The only Eucharistic Prayer we were to use was Number One, with no epiclesis, no mention of the Holy Spirit, The Father's "Great Unknown". Mass had to be in Latin with priests facing away from the congregation. Funny, I thought. However, I said nothing. Pointless to challenge any dictat from The Father. That I knew.

As chaplain of Netherhall and its Boys' club, as well as preaching, celebrating Mass and hearing confessions, I used to drive the Ford Transit minibus. To attract boys into thinking about a possible vocation to The Work, we organized summer holiday and even half term trips across France. One year we went all the way to La Coruña.

Camping in the grounds of the house of a wealthy Supernumerary, we visited Santiago de Compostela and were entertained by its *Botafumeiro*, that massive thurible, swung sideways by a team of experts.



In a mini-bus at La Coruña in 1976. I drove a minibus full of two young Numeraries and the rest potential (we hoped!) members through Spain all the way to La Coruña where we stayed at a fine estate owned by an Opus Dei supernumerary member.

The drive home across the oven-heated plains of Spain was memorable. Our Ford Transit (of a certain age) developed a leaky radiator. It was imperative every half an hour to pull up, turn the engine off and let it cool down enough so that I could unscrew the radiator cap and top up the water.

While I was away in Rome, my god-daughter's family, The Redvers, had moved to Fife in Scotland. Keen to see me, they kept inviting me to visit them. So, I decided that for proselytising reasons, I would take our new minibus packed with a couple of Numeraries and some nine potential vocations up to Scotland; for its scenery and visits to Whisky distilleries.

(The minibus was paid for by a wealthy woman. Though I could not stay overnight with my mother, it was fine to stay with her, with her maid as chaperone, in Bath.)

To break the journey, we would camp overnight in the grounds of Ampleforth Abbey School. Without then knowing who he was, it was there I first saw Abbot Basil Hume as he came to pick up his mail,

In 1972, Greville Howard, having witnessed a fatal motorcycle accident, bought me a brand new light-creamy-coloured VW Beetle car. "I could not bear to think of you ever again riding on two wheels!" he told me.

My father had met The Hon Greville Howards when Greville was Mayor of Westminster from 1946-1947. As soon as my father resigned from his Czechoslovak Embassy position and we became refugees, Greville contacted him. He was to take our family under his wing for many years, and kept me supplied with a car until just before he died.

Driven spiritually, and driving the Beetle (which I did not own as I had taken a vow of poverty as well as chastity and obedience of joining Opus Dei) I started days of recollection for clergy as well as laity in Sudbury and Clare in Suffolk, in Portsmouth and Camberley in Surrey. Gradually I became fluent in preaching until I could give a series of half-hour meditations without notes. At hand, just the Bible and, of course, quotations from The Father.

On the days at Clare, I became friends with and spiritual director to Fr (later Mgr.) Tony Philpot. He was first the parish priest at Newmarket, then at Cambridge before he went to the Venerable in Rome as Spiritual Director.

Invited by a married Supernumerary living in Putney to give a series of talks to his friends in his home, I was asked if it would be all right for them to bring their wives. I said: "Good idea."

However, when I informed my Director on how well that co-ed evening had gone, he said I had to stop. "The Father would never approve of men and women being together at the same talk or meditation. Men and women have different spiritual needs" he told me. Therefore, that was that.

After I resigned from Opus Dei, it struck me that this attitude was one of the reasons that was slowing its development in the UK. The Spanish culture of The Work did not travel well. It felt alien. Many felt it jarred. After all, Jesus had preached to mixed-gender audiences.

One winter's day, driving to Sudbury, I took a corner too fast on the icy road and ran out of road. Providentially there was no tree, no bank, and no ditch. I ended up on a hard, bumpy, frozen field.

As in Rome with the scooter on metal, so in a car on ice, I learned the consequences of speed. It was another Beetle with an excellent music centre, not Greville's, but a hand-me-down from a mother who gave it to me on condition I prayed for her son. It had belonged to him before he died by suicide on a railway line.

At that time, Greville's VW Beetle was in Oxford. There, a Numerary living in Grandpont House had cancer and to improve his quality of life needed a car. I heard how all too soon, while waiting at a zebra crossing, some clown ran slap-bang into his rear. I was told that because its rear engine had been damaged it had to be scrapped. A few years later, at Cardinal Vaughan School, I could not believe my eyes. The very same car was in the school's carpark.

As it was summer, the window on the driver's side was down. I put my arm through that window and rummaged down to the bottom of the windscreen by the hot-air vents. Sure enough, there she was, the small statue of Our Lady I had blue-tacked to the right-hand corner of the dashboard. I took it to the new owner of the car. He, an employee of BT and a Hindu said it was no use to him. I could have it.

Coming out of the car park, a mounted police officer passed by. I went up and told him the story. He said, yes. It was possible. Some scrapped cars are rebuilt and sold on. Seeing that my Beetle had come all the way from Oxford to be close to me in London felt special. Subsequently, that statue travelled blue-tacked on the right-hand side of the dashboards of all the diocesan cars I had use of.

As the Diocese of Westminster said I had to retire in 2019, it understandably refused to let me have another car. So, I bought my own petrol-fuelled Suzuki Baleno which, driven carefully does over 70mpg. In this, my final car, I fixed Our Lady onto the dashboard with super-glue.

In Opus Dei, the end indicated the means, so friendship was used as the bait for vocations. Nowadays, it would be called grooming. In those days, it seemed fine. Indeed, it was celebrated by singing *Pesca Submarina*, a song we sang at The Roman College. Its gist? A member of Opus Dei puts on a snorkel, glides down next to a fish and harpoons it through the head. It ends "*y se acabo*". That's it. Job done.

Although I was well and truly a faithful servant of Opus Dei, I did have more than a twinge of uncertainty when I first spotted Swastika daggers in a glass-fronted display cabinet in the Main Chapel of its HQ in 1965, now known as The Prelatic Church of Our Lady of Peace. When I mentioned my surprise at seeing them, the Rector explained that, like knights of old, Numeraries who had been officers in their country's military surrendered their weapons to God prior to their ordination to the priesthood in Opus Dei. Therefore, that was all right. Then.

It did seem funny that any criticism from outside, rather than being answered by the facts on the ground, was countered by a quote from the writings of The Father.

Inspired by the 16th century *cujus regio, ejus religio* (the employees of an organisation will follow the example of their superiors), in the Men's Section we were told to target our proselytism on the aristocracy of blood, money and brains.

In the Women's Section, I soon learned, they added a couple of extra criteria. "Is she attractive – even beautiful? Does she have charisma and *gancho*?" The subtext being does she have the ability to recruit others?

Being fat was always considered *infra dig*. The Father used to joke about Pope John XXIII's generous stomach by sweeping his hands well in front of his own tummy. Podgy people were rarely targeted.

If our targets turned out not to be up to full Numerary standard, they could become Associates; celibates not living family life in an Opus Dei Centre. People whose vocation included marriage could become Supernumeraries. If they felt unable to make a full commitment, they were awarded the status of Co-Operator..

I remember listening to talks by graduates of MIT and Harvard and then IESE (the graduate business school of the Opus Dei University of Navarra based in Barcelona) on proselytism and on management by objectives.

Once a year, on the evening of 18 March, Numeraries in every centre of The Work drew up their "St Joseph's List", three names they had targeted as possible whistlers over the coming year.

After I left, ex-members told me that they felt that using friendship as a bait amounted to a prostitution of friendship. That was especially so as once the target had 'whistled' that friendship had to be ended. In Opus Dei, particular friendships were forbidden.

I did not question anyone when I saw how our internal publications, '*Cronica*' and '*Obras*', in which The Father's writings are in bold with other quotations, including Sacred Scripture, in italics were 'revised' by having pages sliced out and replaced by updated orthodox texts and photographs.

The original '*entrega*' (surrender = Islam!) became '*fidelidad*'. 'Spiritual exercises', which sounded too Jesuitical, were turned into courses of retreats; while 'major and minor silences' which resonated too closely with Religious Orders became 'afternoon and night times'.

Only after I had left did I realise we had been brought up to believe that an intellectual monastic life, and one separate from our surrounding culture, was the best way to sanctify Numeraries. However, once I started teaching O and A level Religious Studies at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, I soon realised that I had to spread my intellectual wings and read far more broadly.

In Opus Dei, I did a lot of driving. Even though there was a fine Roman Catholic church in East Grinstead, I assumed that the afternoon drive from Netherhall in Hampstead, to Wickenden Manor in Sussex (some 70 miles each way) to celebrate the evening and then the following morning's Masses, as well as

hearing their confessions, for the Women Section living there, must have made a sense. Way beyond my ken. However, doing my unquestioning duty was my road to heaven.

Every summer, I was asked to give theology lectures on Numerary Summer Courses at Wickenden. As Opus Dei subscribed to Geoffrey Chaucer's, "the devil makes use of idle hands", in our free time, there were jobs to be done. To bring clean water down to The Pheasantry, a cottage at the western end of the grounds, we spent many a summer hour digging a three-foot deep trench for the new plastic pipe from the main house.

I had always imagined that reading about knees knocking in fear was a hyperbole. That was until I was tasked to remove the small sapling that had taken root at the top of one of The Manor's chimneys.

I managed to bind two ladders together. However, this composite contraption could not quite reach the offending plant. I stood on the top rung and tried to keep my balance by stretching out my arms. But the chimney was too wide for any decent grip and my knees actually did start to knock as I pulled the offending flora out of that brickwork. As soon as I managed to drop the offending bush and was able to grip the ladder with both hands, the knocking ceased. A memorable experience.

Opus Dei considered mothers a good thing and being kind to them, even if Numeraries could never stay with them, was deemed admirable. So every Christmas Eve I could drive to Bromley and there with Mummy at Georgie's home enjoy family Christmas dinner, tree and presents with Georgie, her husband John and their four children: Robert, Catherine, Julia and, as I called the youngest, Johnjohn.

I was grateful to Henry Kobus, a Supernumerary originally from Poland, He had developed a soft spot for me and designed perfumes. He let me have the results of his experiments. "Better for the environment than pouring them down the drain. Their chemicals are very tough to filter out at the water-treatment centres" he told me. As a result, I was able to give perfumes to the distaff members of my family. The males had to do with books: presents I had myself received and could easily pass on.

As long as I was back for the Netherhall Christmas Midnight Mass all was well. Traffic tended to be rather light. Having given myself a safe cushion of time, I was never late.

As 1973 dawned, I had no idea how traumatic that year would be; no idea the method Providence would use to propel me onto an unexpected and steep path to freedom and fulfilment.

Chapter Four

Shock and after-shock. 1973-1983

Early in 1973, I received a telephone call. "Please, Vlad, can you come to Orme Court. Now please."

I was to go to 6, Orme Court in Bayswater: the Opus Dei HQ in the UK. I had not the faintest inkling why. I had been there many times. This time I was shown into one of the small sitting rooms. Seated there was Father Phil Sherrington, the Regional Counsellor and another member of the Regional Council together with a member of the General Council from Bruno Buozzi. (My memory has suppressed his name.) I was to receive a formal censure, a dressing down.

A Numerary member of the women's section at Wickenden Manor had been caught drinking altar wine. She had admitted she had a drink problem. I was told she had admitted confessing to me. Why had I not coerced her to come clean? "You are a failed confessor. You have betrayed The Father."

I said I was very sorry. As soon I left the room, I went into the small Oratory and burst into tears. Tears I had once not been able to shed before, even for my brother's death, now welled up, unstoppable.

The "betrayal of The Father" seemed to me to be a bit over-the-top. It seemed to smack of revenge from the jealous heavies, as I started to call the members of The General Council in Bruno Buozzi, who had resented me being 'The Father's favourite' for so many years. Who knows? Being soft-hearted, I did not think a confessor should bully anyone. I suggested she should admit her problem to her superiors but I was not prepared to deny her absolution if she did not do that.

My identity, value and potential role in The Work had been razed to the ground. I felt sure that I would never be trusted again. That was the way in Opus Dei, that much I knew. I was devastated, my heart broken.

With hindsight, I had lived for thirteen years in a delightful love-bubble that had suddenly exploded. Excruciatingly painful though it was, I now know it set me on a slow road to freedom and a closer relationship with God. In my prayer, I was enlightened to realise that God was not Opus Dei. Opus Dei was not God.

I had been taught that Opus Dei was God's messenger. Now, rejected by Opus Dei what was my standing with God? I was now able to see what I had never dared to see before. Opus Dei had become the centre of my life, pushing God to the side.

The image that gradually surfaced, and about which I wrote one of my poems, was that of a dead marriage. My spouse, The Work, was not who I thought she was. However, I had given my word. I had to stay. All I could do was to count down the years until, following in my father's footsteps at the age of 51, I'd leave this world for eternity. Only death would set me free.

However, later that year, providence came to my side. As I was now not going to make it into the higher echelons of The Work, I was given a more focused role: recruiting new members. I was told that I was to take on teaching RE and become school chaplain at Cardinal Vaughan School (now Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School or CVMS) in Kensington, West London.

I had always rejected the idea of teaching. Years earlier, as we were leaving Clapham College, a group of my closest friends and I decided never to become teachers: “The lowest form of human life”. One reason I decided to read Civil Engineering was that members of this profession did not teach in secondary schools.

However, obedience is obedience, God wanted it, so off I went. Opus Dei’s hierarchy with their grace of state knows best. Its word was God’s will for me.

The interview at CVMS consisted of, I joke not: “Thank goodness you can come here. When can your start?” The Headmaster, Mgr. Kenefeck, was clearly relieved. My predecessor had lasted just one day! Therefore, having visited County Hall to take a test for TB on the Monday of the third week of the 1973 Autumn Term, I started to teach.

How times have changed. I had no paper qualifications in teaching, but I was even appointed Head of RE – with extra points due thanks to my Doctorate.

I had a very steep learning curve, however a therapeutic one. Long hours of schoolwork, as both Head of RE and Chaplain, with the emotional and physical exhaustion only teachers truly understand, turned out to be an analgesic to the pain of The Father’s rejection.

As so much in my life, *Omnia in Bonum* (Rom 8, 28), it turned out to be a blessing. No longer marooned in Opus Dei, teaching at CVMS meant that I would – without knowing it then – accumulate enough intellectual flotsam to be able in 1981 to launch my boat on a journey to freedom and life to the full with God.

My school chaplaincy role put me in close contact with many real families, with real problems. The research and study I undertook to be able to teach O and A level scripture put me in contact with a wide spectrum of theologies. Sorting these perspectives in prayer enabled me to get to know God as I believe God really is. Not as Opus Dei had said.

God, it now seemed to me, preferred his followers to help others, rather than spend much time on personal piety and vast sums of money on liturgical furnishings. “What you do to the least of mine, you do unto me” (Mt 25, 40) now underpinned my ethics and perceptions of humanity.

Providentially, there were some very good teachers on the Staff. I am particularly grateful to Pat Cross, Head of PE (RIP, Dear Pat!). As the weeks of that first term passed by, the noise level in my 4S fourth form (now bottom stream year 10) lessons rose. Imagining that as a priest I had to be patient, gentle and kind, the lads were beginning to take advantage.

Then, one Monday, 4S were silent. I thought, yes! They have finally realised my love for them. I began to enjoy, even to relish, teaching that form.

It was at the end of term staff drink at the local pub that Pat came clean. "I saw that you were having a bit of trouble so I said to the lads, 'Have you noticed how big Father Vlad's hands are? He used to be a boxer; until he lost his temper and killed a man. That's why he became a priest'."

Strange are the ways of The Lord. Shades of Prague's Velvet Revolution in 1989. Out of a lie, goodness can indeed come. Thanks to Pat's imaginative marketing, I became by all accounts (and the evidence of good exam results) a popular and successful teacher.

I survived and thrived through creative activities. The best fruits do tend to come from well and deeply manured soil. Being head of RE and Chaplain enabled me to see the pupils in the round; from the perspective of the Staff Room as well as through the prism of real life.

While I was on the staff, two pupils: Mark Langham (at whose first Mass I was asked to preach) and James (now Seamus) O'Boyle, as well as a teacher, Terry Phipps, ended up becoming diocesan priests in Westminster.

Terry admitted that he had been thinking about a possible vocation for ages. The daily morning school assemblies in May, in which I led prayers for vocations, had pushed him over the edge.

One day, it might have been 1974, just before the mocks, a lad arrived at school with his right hand in plaster up to his elbow. Of course, he was excused the exams. I later learned that there had been nothing wrong with his arm. At his request his sister, a nurse, had put on the plaster. As nobody had asked him if he had a broken it, he had not uttered a lie. Did his body tell a lie? A nice point for moral theologians to discuss.

On two occasions the following year, again at mock exam days, the police came and asked the boys to go home early. They had received a phone call from the IRA that sounded genuine, warning them that a bomb had been planted. Thanks to being a trusted-by-the-lads chaplain, I soon learned that the call had indeed come from the IRA; from an IRA cousin of one of the lads who did not want to sit those afternoon exams.

Nick, the brother of Stephen Reynolds, a Numerary member of Opus Dei, asked me to prepare him and his fiancé Meg for their wedding in Corpus Christi Church, Tonbridge on 23 October 1971, the hottest October day on record, apparently! It was the first wedding back in England that I took. After their honeymoon, Nick reminded me that as they drove away from the wedding reception, I had called out "Don't do anything I wouldn't do." Evidently, they did not follow that advice. They soon had their first child.

Nick and Meg moved from Ealing to Ropley on 19 December 1975. There, I used to visit them frequently for a sleepover. The children remember the Smarties I used to bring to keep them quiet while the adults talked.

I baptised Emma in October 1972; Juliet in April 1974; Claire in June 1976; Damian in January 1980 and Dominic in January 1983.

Diagnosed with a brain tumour on 16 September 2005, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (I do not believe in coincidences), Meg died on 19 June 2006. Stephen Reynolds and I took the funeral in St Peter's, Winchester.

Nick married Lis on 21 May 2009 in St Peter's. Stephen took the service, I preached. We both concelebrated the Mass. Lis and Nick moved to Twickenham in August 2010.

Vladimir Svoboda, with his wife Rose and children Lucy and Marek in 1972 moved to Hampshire; first to Hurstville Drive, Waterlooville and then to Heath Road, Petersfield.

I celebrated their daughter's wedding to Harry Pounds, baptised their three daughters and became Godfather to the youngest child, Harry. Very sadly she got cancer and I took her funeral. As I write in 2023, I still take the train to Petersfield to take lunch with Vladimir and Rose around once a month. (Long-standing friendships are one of the best gifts we have on earth.)

Even though Greville Howard loved the sea and sailing, he and his wife Mary, to minimize their tax bills, moved to Luxembourg. There they had built an Andalusian style single-story building around a central courtyard. To preclude any dangers of unwanted guests inviting themselves, it had no guest room. To raise funds, I was encouraged to pay them a visit which I did from 29 March to 5 April 1971. They had sold their Roehampton flat and donated the proceeds to Opus Dei. For this, I was proud and praised. I was allowed to occasionally visit them.

Always put up in one of the hotels within an easy drive, providentially, given their generous and splendid hospitality, I was never stopped and breathalyzed.

Patrick McMahon had been a teacher at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School. One parents evening as the Headmaster was addressing the parents, he came into the staff room. "Wow, Robert Desimone has a beautiful sister." He had clapped eyes on Anna, who was there translating for her mother.

Soon, Robert started to bring hand-made sandwiches for Pat's lunch. Sometime later, I celebrated their wedding at St Benedict's, Ealing. The *Schola Cantorum* of The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, under the baton of Tony Pellegrini, sang beautifully.

Being School Chaplain was even more rewarding than teaching. Looking after boys with twisted ankles and broken knees meant not only driving them to Casualty, typically Charing Cross Hospital, (occasionally St Charles's Square Hospital) but also waiting until they were treated after duty staff had finished their lunch-break.

With time, trust grew. First formers became 16 and then 18-year olds who were able to talk about what boys of those ages need to get off their chest. The sixth form residential retreats, many at Allington Castle, were rewarding and educational; not just for the lads but for me.

In 1976, Tony Pellegrini was promoted and became Headmaster. To celebrate that event, I suggested to him that the school could have its own prayer book. He said “good idea” and approved my budget. As soon as I had collected its contents and got it printed, every pupil and member of staff was presented with a copy of *The Cardinal Vaughan School Prayer Book*.

Early in the Autumn Term of 1976, a fourth-former living in unbelievably grim conditions in a Ladbrooke Road flat, (I found a family who were happy to pass onto them their old fridge to replace the broken one there) told me that his mother was very unwell. I used to visit her at St Charles’s Hospital. Belsen-like emaciated, with a nipple showing the size and colour of a raisin, just before Christmas she whispered, “After Christmas, when I am better, I will knit you a scarf.” I took her funeral in mid-January 1977.

After the Funeral Mass, one of the mourners moved away from a group of rather tough looking men. He took me aside. “Fanks for that, Farver. If you want anyone done over – or, you know – just let me know.” I learnt afterwards that the Ladbrooke Mafia had a soft spot for the family of the deceased and wanted to show their gratitude to me. In kind.

Though tempted a number of times, I never took up their kind offer. By now, they would be far too old to be able to deliver on their promise.

Death may be a dead certainty but over the years, I have come across a vast variety of the way people pretend it will not come their way. Death may come tomorrow. However, tomorrow never comes. So, let us plan tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow.



Teachers versus school leavers at Cardinal Vaughan School, April 1977

As I was School Chaplain, the Geography department recruited me to drive the minibus on the Sixth Form Field Trips to Abergavenny. I could celebrate Mass every morning. As well as driving the minibus, I had meaningful conversations with the lads deep into the night. It reaffirmed my conviction that context is crucial in communication.

The lads, and the girls from The Scared Heart, Hammersmith who also went there with their teacher, would open up deep into the night in ways they could never manage in a classroom setting.

Minibus journeys can be tempting for young men. In 1977, I remember how passing by Heathrow on our way to Bristol University so the lads could research the University, a bottle of orange squash was being passed round. Before we passed Slough, they were in high spirits.

I pulled over and asked them to pass me the bottle. As they jibbed at my request, I threatened to turn back. When the bottle did reach me and I took a small swig. It was obvious. Probably 50% Vodka. In my role as Chaplain, not Head of RE, I promised not to mention it. The rest of the day was fine.

On the back of my lack of educational qualifications, I made many mistakes. I remember a hot summer Friday afternoon; a double lesson with 5S (“a sign the deputy has great confidence in you, Vlad.”) I lost my temper. I could not bear to waste time teaching if the lads were not listening. I shouted loudly and then banged the blackboard with the handle of the duster. Instant silence!

That weekend was tough. I felt guilty. My halo had seriously slipped. Then, what a surprise at Monday morning break! As always, I had cooled down my cup of tea with cold water and was out in the playground in four minutes. One of the 5S lads came up “Father, you were great on Friday!” “Me, great?” “Yeh, you showed that you cared.”

So, henceforth, for pastoral-educational purposes I did indeed occasionally shout.

Maybe it is due to my early years under the Nazis that I hate bullies. I cannot stand bullying, as some tough lads, even Sixth Formers, found out. Whenever I became aware of a touch of bullying, I would approach the bully and offer to shake hands.

Thanks to my rowing and lots of DIY I still had a strong grip. So I would tighten my handshake until the bully’s knees started to buckle. “Don’t ever do that again. You are worth much more than a bully.”

No violence. No child protection issues. “Your honour, I was just shaking hands.” No bones were ever broken. Though the numbness wore off, the memories, it seemed, endured.

My Chaplaincy enabled me to find out what many of the lads felt and thought as they passed through their teens and all that. They had learned to trust me. Then, one day, everything seemed to have changed. I was cold-shouldered. It took me some three weeks to discover what had happened.

A fifth former (now year 11), let's call him Jimmy, had got into trouble and told me all about it. As always, I stayed schtum. However, behind the scenes, events were unravelling.

Paddy McMahon, in charge of discipline in the upper school, and coming from North Ireland, had his way of finding things out.

Having caught a fifth former red-handed, let's call him Jude, graffitiiing the Shepherds Bush underpass, Pat struck a deal. He would say nothing on condition Jude kept him informed of everything Pat needed to know.

Thus, when Jimmy's facts hit the fan, and he received his whacking, to deflect any suspicion from himself, I learned that Jude had hinted that the only teacher who knew about Jimmy was Father Vlad.

Without getting Jude into serious trouble with his mates, how could I pass on the facts? As things turned out, Jude left that summer. No Sixth-former, him. Without naming names, I told the story to the next year's Lower Sixth. They understood. Some even apologised for doubting me. I was accepted back into the pupil-fold.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, well Netherhall House, my work as Chaplain continued. However, whereas at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School my role was predominantly pastoral, in the world of Opus Dei it was prophetic and priestly. I spent my time preparing talks, meditations and homilies as well as preaching, celebrating Masses and hearing confessions. However, there were two clear exceptions to my spiritual and pastoral work.

Firstly, I developed the technique of using a full hose thrown over the parapet to suction clean the drains that, being far too fine-bored, were constantly silting up. A relaxing half-hour's therapy after a day's teaching.

Secondly, I learned to take apart, clean and reassemble John Henry's dialysis machine as all too soon, after he qualified as a Doctor, his kidneys had given up. He, on his part, took my weekly 'confidence' (as a chat with a spiritual director was called) during which he tended to fall asleep as I rambled on about my norms and customs. I looked after that machine for seven years until he had his transplant at The Royal Free Hospital.

He almost did not receive it. Having been told one early afternoon that the donor kidney was on its way from, I believe, Newcastle, by one o'clock the following morning we had heard nothing. Therefore, I got onto my Lambretta, drove up to the hospital and walked around the building. Unbelievable!

The courier had abandoned the container by a back, locked door. How he managed to leave without obtaining a signature, I never did find out. I took the refrigerated box to reception. In very short order, John had his transplant. Even though the donor was rather old, it kept John going until 2007, when he died.

He ended up as a Professor, and an expert on poisons. Though after I left Opus Dei, I never met him again (I had 'ceased to exist' as far as Opus Dei were concerned) I always enjoyed his appearances on TV as he commented on any toxin-related medical issues worrying the public.

With hindsight, I can see that I had begun to live two initially parallel but gradually diverging lives: Opus Dei and the Vaughan school. The more I learned about real life, the more bizarre Opus Dei and its values and life-styles seemed. The recipe was wrong.



The staff at Cardinal Vaughan School in 1980, with me in the front row

In the hot summer of 1976, with the staff room windows wide open, I was marking exams. A gust of warm air made me look up. I saw I was alone in that space with just one woman. Mrs Zielinska. A crisis! Should I leave? I chose not to. I was growing up. Albeit slowly

While its epistemology is platonic, its theology Tridentine, its sociology Edwardian, its proselytism and relationship with the outside world Machiavellian and its ecclesiology Gothic, the members of Opus Dei, even though they dress as smartly as the smartest laity, are culturally monastic. When inside the tent, this is hard to see.

Having followed it as near to immaculately as was possible, I came to see the product as unsatisfactory. Acts of piety did not engender love. Spotlessly tidy rooms and the exact timing of norms and customs did not help me resonate with the Holy Spirit that I felt was there both in the real world and especially in the school community.

Sanctity without love was clearly an oxymoron. Life was meant to be a journey of love so that, once we die and are born into divine eternity, we are *capax dei* – capable of life with God who, as we know is love (1 Jn 4, 16).

However, I had committed myself to Opus Dei, so to be true to God, I had to keep on keeping on. Whatever the pain.

As many of the lads we had persuaded of their vocation to The Work left soon after they had written their letter to The Father, a cloud of doubt was growing in my mind. However, ingrained in my heart was the conviction that by working for Opus Dei I was serving God. I carried on organising events at Netherhall as well as minibus trips round the UK, France and Spain to bring the lads into close contact with The Work.

In July 1979, I was back in Barcelona to take the wedding of Pachi Ochoa de Olza and Montse Roca whom I had got to know while in Barcelona. How things had changed. Under Franco, priests were respected. This time round, one afternoon, when I got back to my bedroom, I discovered someone had spat onto the back of my black jacket.

Later that summer – as I celebrated my 40th birthday in May, I was sent on my Summer Course to San Sebastian. Opus Dei, probably to minimise the risk of a mid-life crisis, made a fuss of that ‘big birthday’.

I was spoilt rotten. Taken out a couple of times into the Bay of Biscay on the yacht of a Supernumerary, I was able to swim in the sea, miles from the shore. I also had plenty of spare time, so I began to write about my beliefs and understanding of life. These thoughts, some 40 years later, formed the basis of my book, ‘Life Squared – a handbook for life in an accelerating world’.

At the Vaughan school, I also led two parallel lives. As teacher, I was gamekeeper, but as Chaplain, I ran with the foxes, not the hounds. In the Staff Room and in the Headmaster’s office I saw how they perceived their pupils. As School Chaplain, I was in touch with their reality.

Just three examples of the divergence between perception and reality; one good, one bad, one a mistake. The bad one first.

A sixth-former, who should not have left the school, was caught coming back onto site at the end of the lunch break. When hauled up before the Headmaster, he claimed that he had been out looking for a pen which he must have dropped on his way in that morning. He even described the pen. The Headmaster, known by all behind his back as Pele, had his doubts. The lad had to stay in after school.

However, the sixth-former intercepted a second-former as he was walking with his chums to the chemistry lab, put the pen in his hand and told him to take it to Pele and say you had found it on the road. Or else!

As soon as the final bell rang, the second-former did as he had been told. Result? The Head apologised to the sixth-former. "I am sorry I did not believe you. Here's your pen... It was handed in."

The second, the Noble 4th Former, is more inspiring.

As the 4V classroom had a short corridor leading from the door to the actual classroom, the desks on the left-hand side were invisible from the door.

One morning as I opened the door, I saw a textbook flying from one of the hidden from sight desks right across the classroom. I turned the corner and asked who had thrown it. No answer. I pointed my question at the rowdiest boy in the class who had been placed in the front row next to the best boy in that form. (The form-teacher, who believed in beneficial osmosis, had placed them side-by side.) The bad boy said nothing.

The best boy blurted out, "It was me, Father. I did it." I less than half-believed him.

At the end of the lesson, I took him out into the corridor. "Tell, me as Chaplain not as a teacher, did you really throw that book?" "Well, no Father. But my neighbour has been warned that next time he is trouble his dad will be called in, so I took the blame." Knowing how bullying the bad boy's father was, I knew why.

The mistake. Autumn Term, third week. Seamus, a second former, keeps coming late.

Pele warns him that next time he turns up late, he will get a whacking. I overheard that conversation. Therefore, I went and had a word with Seamus.

He explained that as his dad had died just as the term was starting and his mother had to go out early to work, it was up to him to take his little sister to her primary school on his way to the Vaughan. As he did not want to be different from all his mates, he did not want anyone to know of the loss of his father.

Having received his permission, I went and told Pele the full story. He understood, called Seamus in, and congratulated him on his generosity and courage. However, Pele suggested that perhaps he and his sister could leave home five minutes earlier, as losing teaching time was not a good thing. There was, of course, no whacking.

However, one winter term just before Christmas, a couple of 5S boys whistled as they climbed the stairs. Pele heard them. He called the whole class of 28 boys down to the Foyer and demanded that the culprits step forward. As no one admitted their error, to make sure the two got what he thought they deserved, he whacked all 28. Four strokes each.

So it came to pass that the day after, to conduct the Christmas Carol Service, Pele had to use his left arm. His right arm was *hors de combat*. Knackered by those 112 strokes. I am not sure anyone else noticed but, for me at least, it was a memorable evening: how corporal punishment crippled a carol service conductor.

While on the playground, I never failed to be impressed by the ability of some eight tennis-ball-football matches, interweaving with their neighbours, could be enjoyed without any of the boys barging into each other.

In the mid-1970s, I was introduced to Christopher Nightingale, a ten-year-old boy whose mother Anne (who, when writing her novels, kept her maiden name Redmon) had become a Catholic. Christopher, too, wanted to convert. Therefore, I prepared him and then baptised him. To thank me, Benedict and Anne, the parents, invited me out to dinner to an Indian Restaurant at Hammersmith. An unforgettable meal!

Not having a clue what I was ordering, I chose what turned out to be a red-hot razor-sharp curry. Luckily, the waitress who was still hovering close must have seen my anguished face. She brought a large bowl of yogurt. It saved my mouth. Nowadays, whenever I am asked “Is there anything you do not care to eat?” I reply, “I am an omnivore – except for hot curries.”

As my Wednesday afternoons at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School were free, I often went to their home at Broomhouse Road, Parsons Green for tea. We became friends. Having sensed that within me there was some sort of conflict, that couple, both literary people, encouraged me to write poetry. I used to write a poem a week, which they carefully critiqued and occasionally valued.

One of these, expressing my anguish, written in 1980, is in Appendix A. There is also a thick exercise book full of my other poems. They were a lifebelt that keep me afloat.

They said that within me there were two Vladimirs: the overt, official and not very nice and the covert, real one who was, oh, so different.

Gradually I realised they were right. I now know that I am an opsimath, a person who begins to learn late in life. The real me took ages to surface. Maybe that is the real reason why, apart from my diet, my physical exercises (which you can find on my website www.fathervlad.com) and my spiritual life, I look younger than my years.

My experiences at and thanks to the Vaughan school, like salvaged timber on an island shore, enabled me to build a raft that eventually would enable me to sail free.

What Opus Dei stood for, its aims and objectives, were fine. Their methodology was the problem. The Father's generation, and those early members who lived through the Spanish Civil War and subsequently the problems posed by the Jesuits, quite understandably tinged their ethos with symptoms of paranoia.

Clearly, they felt, The Work was superior but under threat of attack. Best to stay camouflaged. Life is a warfare between good and evil. "All is fair in love and war". Deceit and lying were useful weapons. However, to understand the etiology did not diminish the growing pain I felt within my heart.

Superficially, what kept me going was firstly the conviction that as daddy had died aged 51, I would do the same. It was simply a matter of counting down the years: 15, 14, 13 until the final release. Secondly, I thought that I could not leave Opus Dei because it was God's voice. It told me what God wanted of me.

A letter I wrote in 1980 will reveal my inner state at that time of transition

6.9.80

Dear Phil (Rev Philip Sherrington, then the Counsellor or top Opus Dei dog in the UK. Later, when in November, 1982 Opus Dei became a Personal Prelature, the Regional Vicar.)

It is very hard for me to say this, but not to do so would seem a lack of integrity and loyalty. Having given it considerable thought and trying to be honest with myself, I do not think I can sincerely encourage, let alone make efforts to get people to "whistle as n" (join Opus Dei as a Numerary member). The limbs can and do move, but what is the truth inside?

Reasons? It has inexorably become the sort of life that I would not want anyone I love to have to live. There are, I am sure, people who benefit and need an ever more ordered, controlled and restricted life style and come closer to God in a legalistic and cultural monastic environment, but, being the way I am from the part of the world I am, it does not seem to me to be something I should encourage. Slow motion suttee may be romantic, but it does not lead to an attractive form of sanctity.

"All is for the best", but to encourage young chaps to become introverted, emotionally stunted and insecure by relying on the Directors to take decisions, and thus responsibility, leads to a suspicious and pessimistic frame of mind. Understandably, when in a society where certain traditional values are under attack, people and institutions tend to become wary and exhibit a paranoid tendency in tighter letter-of-the-law and regulation control, but this engenders in the hearts and in the minds (though, unless one is brutally sincere, only subconsciously) a paranoid mentality. For an insecure person the Pharisaic approach is an aid to avoiding humanistic emotionalism, but for someone, who by temperament is more a loner and not really a 'company man', it becomes crippling. It saps initiative.

I am prepared to accept (and have, in practice, done just that!) that God's will for me is to stay put and just grin and bear it and I am NOT thinking of doing a bunk. I gave my word. However, again, to be brutally honest, it would come as a great relief to my emotional-nervous system if The Work thought it best to absolve me from "family life".

I do not think I can change my temperament. I do not want to be a pain, but it is hard not to be when one is in pain. Told to stay indoors and wait for Pastoral Work that does not come is, for someone as twisted as I am, pain. I need air, people and movement to breathe.

How can I encourage young chaps to join when it will mean not being trusted, having to be treated as kids all their life? When they are young, they may need that sort of treatment. As they mature physically, if they are not treated as responsible Sons of God, they become twisted. When a foot grows, it needs more room. So, does the soul. I am against the Old Chinese Foot-Binding. The effects are grotesque. Love of man atrophies to a dry 'love of God'; of law.

What happens to me does not really matter. I will not be here for more than ten years, but some sort of more mature relationship between older Numeraries and their directors seems vital if the Apostolate is to grow in this Region. Though analyses of history are long and this is not the place to make them, I suspect the sluggish growth of sg work (recruitment of married people) and 'joyful mature n' is due to a smallness of minds and hearts in living the Spirit. Obeying the Praxis is not enough. Each n, (Numerary: celibate member living in a community) while being a member of an organisation, is an individual with his own personal vocation and responsibilities and while goodwill can grit teeth and keep a timetable and everything nice and tidy and neat, it cannot make the heart dance and that then slays the Spirit of the Work; the Gaudium cum pace. In other words, while embracing my situation, I cannot deny that I feel closest to Our Lord sweating blood on Gethsemane. This I do not want anyone else to have to do. I thought it worthwhile letting you know.

As ever and for aye.

Vlad

P.S. Perhaps the root of it all lies in that, for me, life is more to do with truth than security. For an organisation (and those identified with it rather than just living in it), I suspect it may be the other way around.

As no reply came, I sent Rev Philip a more detailed document in July 1981.

Considerations on the state of The Work in London.

Though, in any supernatural undertaking, the mysterious ways of God cannot be fully understood and though we do live in an imperfect world, it appears obvious that we have a problem, or, to be more exact, a series of problems which add up to a picture I cannot inhabit without making the following points, hoping and praying they might be of some use and help in solving some of the problems and thus helping the growth of what certainly, at its birth and essence, is divine.

1. The loss of vocation in the sf (c)., the lack of vocations in the sv (d), the absence of joy in the older members and the much more hard to define, but impossible to deny 'ethos of emptiness' (lack of 'news', activities, plans for growth, together with a defensive and ever more austere approach to daily life) all add up to a scene which may have been provoked by the media mess of January, (The Times Profile of OD with pictures of cilice and cat-o-nine-tails) but which, as I hinted at last autumn, has been there for some time.

2. *The causes of this seem, at my present depth of analysis, to be the following:*

(a) *Lack of confidence due to absence of role and identity in the rapidly changing society in which members – once they have left college and the sheltered state of students – have to live.*

(b) *Formation for an ideal society that does not exist. The formation is then seen as inadequate – morally, apostolically, emotionally, psychologically – and panic sets in. (The not inconsiderable number of psychosomatic ailments, the sheltering behind paperwork and structures, fear to ‘take risks’ when organising activities for public consumption, the de-whistling(e) of ‘extrovert’ members, all seem to point to this deficiency).*

(c) *Evaluating the Organisation above the individual who is seen as there for the benefit of the structure (rather than vice versa) and this in a society and culture where the individual is traditionally accepted as paramount, even though he is meant to work as a member of a team.*

(d) *A lack of open discussion within The Work about the problems and openness towards the outside world about our real intentions and aims. The instrumentalization of activities (and even friendship) makes for cynical older members and an attitude of mind which perceptive parents and those who love us (precisely because they DO love us) sense, pick up and, willy-nilly, spread.*

3. *Solutions are always far harder to suggest that criticisms to make, but the following might be of some help.*

(a) *Try to find ‘courses for horses’, i.e. try to get the members to do what they are best or most comfortable at, rather than get them to fulfil functions which they are inadequate or even incapable of fulfilling. (This will be very hard to do). Constant consultation, every 3 months*

(b) *Inform the priests of ‘the bad’ news! (To find out from a Headmistress, as I did yesterday, that one of the teachers there had de-whistled does not edify either the outsider or the priest in question.) Adults like being treated as adults and not as children to be kept in the dark. Older members appreciate trust.*

(c) *Work far more through the parishes! As is well known, the parish structure in the UK is very well developed (just think of the Catholic Directory) and all the effort of the hierarchy is directed towards ‘Building up the Community’. At present, we are considered, even among very good clergy and teachers, as nice but irrelevant. That does not help confidence of membership.*

Vocations will come – truth and goodness always appear in the end and so does camouflage – if we were to offer our services (as individuals) in helping with clubs, confessions, Family Support Groups etc. Currently some of the most successful, well-supported groups are in those places where the parish advertises and supports the activity. It is, patently, a service to the Church and thus worthwhile.

(d) *Flexibility and warmth. Affection in dealing with all those who help and are moved more by the heart than by the written letter of the law*

(e) *Readiness to accept mistakes and admit them publicly.*

(f) *A much more encouraging approach to talks and preaching. “Naked perfection” is depressing. The ideal ideals, once a person has moved out of the early twenties, or at any rate has started to mature, need to be served with the milk of human kindness. “Duty to be perfect” soon becomes an albatross around the neck of those who were once keen, but now are constantly faced with an unattainable goal and, as a result feel guilty. No wonder those with character leave and the rest suffer.*

(g) *Accept that many of the accidentals of liturgy and human behaviour, while, perhaps, being a sign of some serious deficiency in one country, may be perfectly fine in another. For example, in the UK many very saintly people accept communion in the hand and even under both kinds. Altars facing the people!!! Ladies and trousers (the Queen herself wears them for walking in the country).*

(h) *The ‘Cultural Monasticism’, a result of rigorously maintained control on media, creates a sense of isolation and, in my experience in the confessional, does NOT help sexual morality. Without contact, there is a far greater danger of myth and fantasy creation. The spores of passion we all have, but a person properly formed – as an adult who does what he wants because he wants to – ‘porque le da la gana’ – while watching a TV program can just turn his gaze away rather than provoking thoughts by turning the whole set off, or not even turning it on in the fear (very conducive to at least insipient paranoia) that some evil may be there. IF rigorous censorship worked in practice, it could be rationally defended. What USED to work may not do so now. To my mind, it does not. We must, surely, live in the ‘middle of the street’, not just geographically but culturally-psychologically. If one is deeply dedicated to organising things from behind a phone, typewriter, note, it is all too easy to become remote and out of touch*

4. *I know it is not at all easy to implement these. It is not easy to find open, magnanimous, mature people to govern (That sort is, very often, not easily assimilated by a structured organisation). However, if at least there was an emphasis on JOY (rather than the letter of the law), OPENNESS (rather than silent, secrecy of office), LIFE (rather than tidy neatness), then the old saying: “The better (the neater, safer) is the enemy of the good” might be given a chance to prove itself. The INDIVIDUAL PERSON is paramount for Jesus Christ, for God.*

5. *Dear Phil, I know this will make hard reading but not as hard as the writing of it! I have been thinking about things for a long time and cannot just sit back and watch “the area” fragment and decay. I DO believe in the divine origin of The Work but, as Our Father would criticize the Church without ever lacking loyalty, I have tried to do the same.*

6. *By the way, one of the problems of living the Post-Foundational period is that there is bound to be a tendency to worship the Founder (to the cost of an open, vital relationship with God in Christ) and thus in a society like the UK is, where the hero-worship of anyone is suspect, this does not help the organisation grow.*

7. *I have been thinking of writing something for Rome (BB 73 i.e. OD HQ), but wanted to share my thoughts with you first. (If the language of these bits of paper is a bit stilted, it is because I have tried to be as objective as I can be about something I am pretty deeply a part of.)*

Lots of love

Fr VF

I send this to you now so that you can have a chance to muse over it (perhaps with Federico R-M) and know that there is loyal, prayerful thought and thoughtful prayer being applied to help the Work of God go through a difficult stage of its growth in this country.

A week later on 14 July 1981 a note was given to me saying, thanks. No topic I had raised in my correspondence was ever discussed

By this time, the only thing that kept me going was my relationship with God. No longer with a demanding Father, but with Jesus, who became my best friend and as the years passed by, with the Holy Spirit; the feminine, the mysterious-openness of the divine that had unexpectedly swept me off my feet on Eriskay in Scotland many years ago.

One summer day in 1954 while on holiday in Eriskay with my friend John, who had gone off to play with his friends, I decided to climb the hill, the highest point on Eriskay, passing on my way the skull and horns of a deceased sheep. At the top, I sat down and looked west across the Atlantic Ocean. Suddenly something utterly unexpected happened.

The only way I can to put it is that I fell in love with infinity.

It was my personal Pentecostal Experience. I experienced the Divine Presence throughout my body. I felt warm at peace and one with everything around me. It was bliss; a sensation that I can still sense within me within what I call “The Land of my Heart” or simply “Heart”. This spaceless reality is there in every atom of my body. It is me.

Again unexpectedly, on 15 August 1981, The Assumption of Our Lady, a similar epiphany slapped me awake. As at Eriskay in 1954, so at Wickenden in 1981, thanks to the Holy Spirit, my sub-conscious burst up into my consciousness.

God was not distant. As England, though far greater than London (whatever Londoners may believe!), is within London, so God is in every element of Space-Time yet is far greater than Space-Time with its 95% of creation’s Dark Energy and Dark Matter about which we know nothing; other than it must exist.

In 1954 at Eriskay I experienced his presence in my heart. At Wickenden, in the Pheasantry, on 15 August while preparing my lectures, the proverbial penny, more like a massive gold bar, finally dropped.

I suddenly realised that Opus Dei was, for me, no longer God’s infallible mouthpiece. It had in fact held me back from embracing the Holy Spirit. I had outgrown my Boy Scout’s uniform. I needed to become an adult, a self-responsible Catholic Christian. I no longer needed an intermediary, a go-between, in my spiritual life with God. To say **yes** to the real God I had to say **no** to Opus Dei with its right wing, pessimistic and Augustinian view of our humanity.

While teaching RE and as Chaplain, in spite of what The Work had taught me, my understanding of the world changed and gradually I became convinced that:

1. God has a divine preferential option for the poor. Jesus said (Mt 25:35): “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me”. And in Mt 25:40 “whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

2. God's Trinity includes the feminine Ruach, Spirit. Women, in God's eyes and in the relationships Jesus had with women, are not, as in Escriva's view, inferior to men.

3. I no longer subscribe to the Opus Dei-Augustinian pessimism that humans are corrupted in nature and that the only cure for this is God's grace. Judging from the take on human nature Jesus had, I believe that God sees us as essentially good though weak, rather than corrupt sinners in constant need of reconciliation.

That August, I put my books to one side and started to write my letter of resignation. However, when I reached "It is 22 years since I whistled" I paused. Not true. I had written my letter to The Father on the 23 of September 1969.

I finished the letter. I would post it at 6, Orme Court on the 23 September 1981. Throughout those 40 days that followed, I prayed "*Domine ut videam*" as Bartimaeus had begged Jesus. "If I am wrong, please show me." There was no sign. Thus, on 23 September I slipped that letter, addressed to Fr Philip Sherrington, through the number six letterbox.

Written on 15 August 1981 and given a quarantine.

1. To make it no mere impulsive gesture.
2. 23 September 1981 marks exactly my 22 years in Opus Dei

Dear Philip

There are, in our lives, moments when decisions must be taken – whatever the cost – as to take none is itself a decision. My decision this summer, though no surprise, will hurt me even more than you will.

I believe a vocation is no mere call from God at one moment in life, but a constant invitation to relate to the Blessed Trinity in openness of life. God does not change, but His eternal word unfolds for us in time gradually. Thus, though I think God HAS wanted me in Opus Dei, I am now convinced He wants me here no longer and I must ask to be allowed to leave.

As you know from the notes I sent you on 6 September 1980 and 8 July 1981, this is no snap decision, but the result of much prayer and soul searching. The last years have not been comfortable. Now, after 22 years in The Work and 12 years of Priesthood, I have come to see that, though my priesthood is in no way in doubt, my membership of Opus Dei should end.

It is not easy to formulate why exactly. After all, so much of our life is sub and supra-rational, but I have tried to put things down for our mutual benefit.

Opus Dei's ideals and inspirations are, I am convinced, divine, but the institutionalization; the current practical application of these aspirations by the type of person these attract is no longer an aid to God for me and thus proselytism is impossible. The Way has become impassable, the stepping-stones obstacles and what was a joy when I was young and less mature is now sad and asphyxiating. A suit of armour defends a small frame, but does not allow growth and can at last become the cause of death.

To try to stay, put on a brave show and carry on is to live a lie and this is bound to be finally destructive. I have struggled on over the past few years in case I was simply passing through a shadow problem of middle age, but it is denser and far deeper than that. I have tried to marshal the arguments for staying, but, though they reveal the poverty of my nature, they do not convince.

I accept there is fear; sheer terror of being 'on my own.' For an exile who has experienced that friends can fade when they are most needed, this is not easy to exaggerate. The warmth and comfort of a 'family', which cares for vital material needs, especially as one gets older, IS attractive.

The pain probably caused to the people who remain and the shock to the faith of those I know (though this may be of service to them in the long run) is ugly, cruel. Human respect and the sort of things likely to be said to justify my departure do weigh on me (my own childhood makes certain of that!). The probability that, up to now, I have needed a 'corset' to control my impetuous, romantic idealism has held me back. As you know, I believe God has always given me what has led me on towards Him, even though this has often been 'The Cross'.

The words: "God needs me in Opus Dei" I reject as being but an admission of my own insecurity.

The dream that, perhaps from within, I could change The Work back to how it was in the early days of my vocation has also made me hesitate, but the damage this would do to those who need a firm carapace for their insecurity and weakness has made me reject this. I do not think God wants me to lead a 'palace revolution', even though the Elijah-Robin Hood in me finds the thought appealing

What HAS held me back up to now has been the thought that; "I gave my word". However – and this is what has tipped the balance – I see now that I gave my word to GOD and NOT The Work. I will, with God's help, carry on being a priest and live the Spirit, even though not the praxis, of Opus Dei. THAT is what I promised, that I do not want and may not change.

The three root differences between current "Orthodox" Opus Dei in practice and myself are that I see the individual as more important than the institution, the fullness of life (truth) more important than security and the way to God progressively in silence than in speech.

The recruiting, training and apostolate are, in my pondered experience, primarily directed towards the growth and well-being of the family. The second has caused the members of The Work to grow ever more defensive and suspicious of the world in which they live. (The history of The Work in Spain explains a lot). Thirdly, mechanistic 'norm fulfilment' distracts rather than now leads to God. It is at odds with my temperament.

Of course, ritual, organisational unity, doctrinal lucidity, the denial of the human condition and its needs add up to an apparent strength and thus attract. Seeing life as a battle rather than a pilgrimage gives The Work its momentum and its fame.

The yearning for redemption – Eschatological Salvation – has led the ethos of Opus Dei to an ever more acute 'Cultural Monasticism' (at times camouflaged as 'Supernatural Outlook'); avoiding contact with the deeper thinking and feeling of the world in which the members geographically live. Whether The Work hints at the Pharisees, Knights Templar or a sort of Roman Catholic Foreign Legion is debatable, but its multinational uniformity has its weakness. The 'ideal' becomes an

enemy of the 'good' when experience in one country is taken as a priori good for all. Violence is done to men and women of both cultures.

What occurred in the church from 313 AD to the mid-16th century has taken The Work the last 20 years. However, to stop at pre-Cartesian thought is to be left behind by the journey of God through the hearts of men. God is eternal, but the views of men change and, as their attitudes vary, their language of expression alters. To be apostles, fishers of men, one must be where the heads of these are. It is where I think God wants me to be and the gap between The World and Opus Dei grows ever wider. Perhaps God wants it that way.

To review is not to criticize. The people who need the carapace of the Praxis and the structure as a parent; those who are inclined to delegate moral responsibility for their eternal salvation I do not criticize. THAT is why, without complaining, I have carried on over the past few years. However, as the song I often heard in The Work, 'cada caminante sigue su camino' ("We each have our own journey through life.") and I must mine.

Oh Philip, I AM sorry. Brutal honesty is very, very painful. However, God is Truth, Life, and Love and to Him I MUST be true. I must try! The Work HAS given me so much but – on balance – I consider we are quits.

Is it cowardice to leave? Would it be cowardice to stay? Judgements I leave to God. To wait longer would be to endanger the vocations of those who feel they must stay and make me bitter and cynical. Life on earth is short and I think God wants me to spend the last years of my life in teaching, preaching, writing, prayer and the Sacraments and, perhaps, some laughter and some friends. We shall see.

So please, Philip, do get the wheels in motion to get the Father to release me from Opus Dei. I am sure I can find a room in some Diocesan house and move quietly away. Who knows, I might be of more service to The Work outside the structure than there within. Do pray for me as I do for The Work and you

*For aye
vf.*

The subsequent sequence of events was as follows.

Thursday 24 September 1981. At 8.31 p.m. I received a 'phone call from Phil. "Your letter threw me". We agreed to meet at Orme Court at 3 pm the following day.

Friday 25 September 1981. I arrived at 3 p.m. Phil came down to a ground floor room at 3.05 pm looking shocked and hurt. Apart from one half-hearted attempt to bully me when he said: "Your letter was not very supernatural" which I countered with "It states what I think and feel," he was friendly.

I stuck to my guns. He realised that I had made my mind up.

In conclusion, he laid down a procedure for me to follow.

1.I had to wait a few months.

2.To fade from the scene, I was to move from Netherhall House to Westpark in Ealing. This I did on 7 October.

3. I was to speak with Phil weekly.

4. I was to carry on as before (only the Inner Circle at 6, Orme Court knew about my decision).

5. I was asked to wait to hear from The Father before writing my letter to him.

After a half-hearted invitation to stay for tea, I left Orme Court at 4.33 p.m. Phil was in a sorry state. I felt sorry for him.

Shocked by my letter, senior members of Opus Dei warned me that if I jumped ship I would disintegrate. Years later, from Bill Boardman, one genuinely friendly Numerary with whom I kept in touch for a few years, I learned that many of the 'heavies' (as he called them) expected me to fall apart and end up an alcoholic.

"You are not emotionally mature enough to decide to leave," said Fr Henry Root, national Spiritual Director, as he took me for a walk around Wimbledon Common. I replied, "Let's ask Cardinal Basil Hume if I am emotionally mature enough." That name shook him (see Appendix C).



Cardinal Basil Hume OSB, OM. "Uncle George" to his family of which I was and am an honorary member.

Over the following weeks, prayer in the form of two half hours of morning and evening meditation, took on renewed urgency.

I knew they were vital for my sanity and survival. Rather than relying on Opus Dei structures, fulfilling its norms and customs and showing I loved God by recruiting members to Opus Dei, I needed to become radically united with God. I knew I had to reassess and rethink everything I had learned through Opus Dei.

Why had I not realised that in Opus Dei the two Great Commandments, Deut 6, 5 and Lev 19, 18: Love God above all, love your neighbor as yourself, were disconnected. In practice, I had to love God and love Opus Dei – not on helping the disadvantaged, the marginalised. The attitude was that only the best was good enough for God.

Matthew 25, 40 with its, “What you do to the least of mine you do onto Me.” was deemed irrelevant. Loving others meant recruiting them to Opus Dei whose God was, and maybe still is, an abstract, disincarnated-in-humanity divinity.

However, as my radical identity was rooted not in Opus Dei but, thanks to my inner tensions after 1973 in my relationship with God, I survived and then even thrived. Less than a year later I was given permission to move on and Cardinal Basil Hume incardinated me into Westminster Diocese just before lunch on 1 April 1982

Basil Hume got to know me rather well. As I gradually became an honorary member of his family, he was for me, as for all members of that august community, Uncle George.

When people asked him about me not being ordained bishop he, I have been told, used to say, “Vlad’s life has been too interesting for that to happen.”

After that, my mother and I were totally cut-off by Opus Dei. She did not even get her usual Christmas card from the Rector of the Roman College, Ignacio Celaya, whom she had met when she came to visit me prior to my Ordination. She was very hurt by that.

When I challenged them on this, saying that whatever they thought of me, why hurt my mother and her relationships?, the next Christmas she did get one.

When I left Opus Dei, I felt we were quits.

The Work had given me traditional theological formation and protected me from the spiritually toxic Post Vatican II culture that sucked out so many priestly vocations. I had enjoyed thirteen years of affectionate relationship with The Father. I had learned to teach and preach.

For Opus Dei, I had raised much cash and brought on board a number of vocations who did not depart. Over the years, I had recruited Michael Shanks, now living in France, and three Numeraries who became Opus Dei priests: Robert “Bob” Farrell, Lawrence “Lol” Richardson, past pupil of Clapham College, and Gerard Sheehan, Head Boy at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School who became the first-ever Opus Dei parish priest, at St Thomas More, Swiss Cottage.

When people ask me why I left Opus Dei, I reply:

1. Dishonesty.

Whenever a lad ‘whistled’ and had written a letter to The Father asking to join, he was told NOT to let his family know. They were ordered to live a lie.

Opus Dei aimed to spread the Kingdom of God using deceit. Members were encouraged to become pretend friends with the aristocracy of brains, blood and wealth. Nowadays that is called grooming.

Activities had a covert as well as an overt agenda. Camps, educational events were officially there to help young people. In fact, they were there to attract possible vocations. When in Rome, parallel to my studies and work in the Architect’s office, I was asked on to the team setting up CRIS (Centro Romano di Incontri Sacerdotali); one of Opus Dei’s most successful projects. Ever.

Overtly, it was there to support students and lost souls in Rome: a spiritual and emotional anchor in a city swirling with La Dolce Vita. In fact, it was a honey trap: a platform to attract ‘the great and the good’ when they were in Rome, so they could get to know Opus Dei. It worked very effectively with Archbishop, then Cardinal, Karol Józef Wojtyła, then Pope John Paul 2. (For more on this, see Appendix B.)

For years, I had embraced cognitive dissonance. In love with God, I calmly accepted the request of Don Iñaki Celaya, Rector of The Roman College, to excise from my Spiritual Path prior to my ordination, the paragraph about my almost Jesuit vocation. The Father, he reminded me, had said that as all members of Opus Dei were totally lay and in no way with a religious vocation; no one who had ever thought he had a religious vocation was fit for Opus Dei. In those heady last weeks in Rome, I had forgotten that every Numerary had a secular, lay vocation and never had any inclinations to a Religious vocation. I had forgotten that the facts had to fit the theory.

2. Lack of respect. It was never a matter of “How can Opus Dei help a lad fulfil his vocation? It was: “How can we get him to live the spirit of the Work?” A one size fits all. The Work was a Procrustean bed. A standard that is enforced uniformly without regard to anyone’s individuality.

3. Lack of freedom. Numeraries were treated like children. Told but never consulted on what to do.

4. Though we were told we were a family, as soon as a Numerary was transferred from one centre to another, contacts with all previous ‘sisters’ or ‘brothers’ were forbidden. No phone-calls. No letters allowed.

5. Opus Dei was convinced it was superior and thus had to stay separate from the hoi polloi. While, as Chaplain at the Vaughan school I matured through my contact with reality, I found this pharisaic tinge increasingly obnoxious and alien to the values of The Kingdom of God.

6. Its pessimistic, right-wing view of humanity dragged spiritual progress towards joy and freedom backwards. From my experiences at Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School, I had become convinced that rather than rotten, human nature was good yet weak. More like a clean plastic bag than a rotten leather one. Neither could hold more than three bottles of wine. Yet there was a difference. God's love had assuaged my Catholic guilt.

I could go on to mention that that Escrivá, with his Edwardian psychology, was convinced that class, certainly with women, made a massive difference to their emotional abilities. Assistant Numeraries, cooks, laundry and room cleaners, could hold babies as they were unlikely to become broody. However, professional class Numeraries dressed in white, might get broody. So, no holding babies. The Assistant Numeraries, dressed in green, did not have to sleep on boards as the white vested ones who, deemed more sensual than their 'younger sisters', had to.

7. Criticisms of the way Opus Dei behaved were countered not by facts on the ground but by quotations from The Father. The ideal had become detached from reality.

8. Its materialistic elitism. The way we dressed, the way the Roman HQ was designed, had to show we were the best. It was clearly stated that when looking to recruit members we should focus on "The aristocracy of status, intellect and blood." Only the best was good enough for God; in membership as in liturgical furnishings and vestments.

9. Thanks to my teaching scripture at the Vaughan, Synoptic Gospels at 'O' level/GCSE and Johannine writings at 'A' level, I came to see ever more clearly that the Kingdom of God, with its view that all of humanity was God's one family was not how Opus Dei saw things.

10. The Organisation was paramount. The needs of The Work, as I experienced with my undergraduate and postgraduate studies and my rowing, was more important than its individual members. This, I later found out, resonated with the Shinto belief in the subordination of the individual before the group.

With hindsight, my time in Opus Dei was Ubuntu: good for me and good for The Work. Now, aged 84, I see my joining, living within it for over 22 years and leaving, as three blessings. I echo St Paul's words to the Galatians (2,20), "I live now, not I, it is Christ who lives in me." (Maybe, that is one of the reasons why I do not look my age!)

APPENDIX A

Survival through poetry

“Price of beauty Celibate obedience”

[Written around 1980]

Love, fold your beauty I must go
I gave my word, my duty is to blow
The dam. Life's valley, plains
Are parchment parched
Drought-drunken, dark bracken barked
Trees die.

He packs
Explosives, gear, spools and turns alone
Towards the purple-purdah hills.
Scab-cactus pads cake loose grey grit.
Baked-clay river-bedded-stones bruise feet.
Worn withering sand-seared eyes search on.
Massive-passive stones hang high.
Red-rimmed dusts pour arid drifted dreams
Sifts sand drilled skulls of thoughts.
Lizards quick-thick flicker.

After midnight
Muscles wake, demand and throb.
Sobbing, thrusts in sweat-drenched silent-screams
Lust's jungle-tangled, black exploding
Dreams.
Die!

Feint platoons of consciousness
Slip by
Wise eyes of darkness gaze
Unchanged
Floes of chill friends float drifting
by
Night's powerless darkness
Lethal cold
Breeds gangrene's child

At dawn.
He moves
Through ancient folds
Of pain
Skin blocks the body's blood. He packs.
He climbs up
Towards the rose bed dawn.

A dark-eyed cave draws his feet
Inside breathless
Cuts quartz air, his face.
Wise trickling water drains desires.
He shrugs the pack and kneels; imbibes
And drinks, drinks, drinks and thinks
His pulses race.

He sits. Temples, eyes, his ears drum-drum
The heart says "No. Go deeper
Down into the cool, cool cave and drown
Forget. It's easier to die." But NO
That voice
"The heart will desiccate and die. "
Damn. There is no choice.

Hell. Forget the view and concentrate.
Explosives fused and primed. The plunger checked. The spark.
He rises. Stands
And goes. His fear drains his skin
And body weeps with sweat.
He dries. Love's
Claustrophobic vacuum is now filled.

A stone
Dislodged
A last pool swirls and sucks
Its scum. Self-pity seeps infectious: futile death.
Khaki webbing cuts
Grilled shoulders
Sweat sticks
Spine to pack. Torn blisters
Burst. Pain pieces passion, stumbles, trips

And sprawls.
He crawls. Drags dust. Night falls.
Its tight drilled diamonds hack
His truth — his meaning — tears and takes.
Night's timeless eyes
Love's mercilessly fearless judge
Says 'go'. Urgent now
You know. YOU know!

Awake! The heat!! The sun reveals pilled rubble
Spars and there above, a barrel? Gun?
He climbs the crumbling stairs and sees.
He fingers feels the cogs, the wheels
Red-rigid locked and seized. A hollow
Tube, a rain-burned ruined telescope.
Glassless staring eyeless gapes
Into the timeless sky. Love's
As hard as stars at night are bright.
They vanish as love's dawn.

He turns. Again, he sees the valley's heat
Quiver, bounce, dance-white, vibrate
Sand, the silver-rippled rock-splashed plain.
Yesterday
So vast
The past now stands so small.

Thin-cooler crisper- cracking air and rocks
Empty cushions quiet.
The final fight and then
Tonight, the dam.

Too vast. Too tall. Too small the charge.
Of how far, far too far too small. "I tried"
Amorphous sadness locks his shoulders, throat.
A sigh? No kite no dove to see
The pain. So why not stop and merely hide? Be free?
Beauty. Honour. Love. Despair. Not now the mind
Rebels
Flicks flames of fire.

To stay alive is
Death. Eyes glow insane: tyrannical, vast-blind
Strain. Astringent anger cuts life's trailing cord.
The mind lies
Icy. Free. Let's see
Ah! The rock below is soft; a fault there and
But that would be
My death. But Christ!
The gorge, the valley, plain
Thirst. Die. Voracious taut desire explodes.
Not if
But when and how we die
We may at times
decide.

He works with bayonet, butt and hand
That lighter coloured sand
The fools.
Life's massive undertow of fear
Drags fingers; slow the progress
Locks the heart' s
Abysmal gap
Of God.

The charge is set.
The plunger, flash.
The thump and then
And then the shell cracks
Cracks open
Goodbye
I hope.
I die.
I smile.
I heard love is
Worthwhile.

APPENDIX B

Reasons for my reticence about Escriva's early canonisation

As Bishop and then Cardinal, Karol Wojtyla had to visit *dolce vita* Rome in the sixties and seventies. His purest experience of Church he found at CRIS. When elected Pope, John Paul II looked around for people he could rely on, people who shared his philosophy of life and theology.

The Jesuits, who had hitherto been the elite, seemed flaky, too close to Liberation Theology and the 'option for the poor'. Opus Dei seemed a far safer pair of hands. It resonated with his own values: antagonism to Communism; women ideally mother, wife – or virgin; unconditional obedience to authority and conservative theology.

A Numerary priest, Spanish teacher, was supplied to take breakfast with the Holy Father prior to his trip to Latin America. Tighter Canon Law interpretations and execution could be – and indeed were- put in place by members of Opus Dei.

Escriva's Beatification process was difficult for me to swallow. A 'saint', in the RC church tradition, is deemed not only to be definitely in heaven but is someone who can be a role model; an example of a holy life.

How could a man, who believed Hitler could not have killed more than three million Jews and was happy to have Swastika-decorated daggers hanging on display in the main chapel of Opus Dei HQ, be held up as an exemplary role model?

The point I tried to make was that it was far too soon for his Beatification, rushing things, just because the current Pope was on their side, could be dangerous. Much safer to wait until his contemporaries have died; until memories of Hitler had faded. Giving a hostage to fortune was dodgy. Unwise, it seemed to me, to hold up as a role model someone who had – quite understandably – admired Hitler who, as the man who, thanks to the weapons he supplied to Franco in 1939, had saved Christianity in Spain.

Escriva had a similar mind-set. Order and authority above all else. Order in the Norms and Customs guaranteed sanctity. (Love was deemed emotional, porous at the edges).

A place for everyone. Everyone in his or her place. (When a woman joined as an Assistant Numerary, no matter how intelligent she might be, she would never be promoted to Numerary and change the colour of her uniform to white.)

The authority of God, of the Church magisterium, of The Father himself' were essential. (Conscience was deemed too individualistic, secondary. A 'well-formed' conscience would always resonate with the commands given from above. Criticism was a sign of intellectual pride: The Original Sin in Genesis).

In the event, Opus Dei canon lawyers in the Vatican stated that anyone who had left Opus Dei would be biased and thus their testimony was deemed inadmissible. The testimonies of Maria del Carmen Tapia, John Roche and mine were ignored.

Looking back, Escriva seemed reluctant to bring the Holy Spirit, “The Great Unknown”, into his spirituality. Hence exclusively Eucharistic Prayer 1. He may have learned that in Hebrew ‘spirit is *Ruah* – feminine.

His view on nature was very Spanish. To admire it too much smacked of pantheism.

The positio claims, for instance, that Escrivá lost his temper only once, yet many former members who knew him will insist he was routinely abusive of anyone suspected of being an enemy of Opus Dei. Former Numerary Maria del Carmen Tapia relates this in her book “Beyond the Threshold: A Life in Opus Dei”.

APPENDIX C

Cardinal Basil Hume OSB on Opus Dei

“For a considerable time, I have studied carefully certain public criticisms made about the activities of Opus Dei in Britain and I have also examined the correspondence addressed to me on the same subject. Some of these letters have been critical; some have expressed sincere admiration for the personal qualities of members of Opus Dei and appreciation of their influence. I have also had meetings with those responsible for Opus Dei in this country.

Opus Dei is a movement of priests and lay people within the Church that has the official approval of the Holy See. However, in so far as it is established within the diocese of Westminster, I have a responsibility, as bishop, to ensure the welfare of the whole local Church as well as the best interest of Opus Dei itself.

As a result of this study I have made known to those responsible for Opus Dei in this country what I consider to be the right recommendations for the future activity of its members within the diocese of Westminster. I now wish to make public these four recommendations. Each of them arises from one fundamental principle: that the procedures and activities of an international movement, present in a particular diocese, may well have to be modified prudently in the light of the cultural differences and legitimate local customs and standards of the society within which that international body seeks to work.

These recommendations must not be seen as a criticism of the integrity of the members of Opus Dei or of their zeal in promoting their apostolate. I am making them public in order to meet understandable anxieties and to encourage sound practice within the diocese.

The four recommendations are as follows:

- 1.** No person under eighteen years of age should be allowed to take any vow or long-term commitment in association with Opus Dei.
- 2.** It is essential that young people who wish to join Opus Dei should first discuss the matter with their parents or legal guardians. If there are, by exception, good reasons for not approaching their families, these reasons should, in every case, be discussed with the local bishop or his delegate.
- 3.** While it is accepted that those who join Opus Dei take on the proper duties and responsibilities of membership, care must be taken to respect the freedom of the individual; first, the freedom of the individual to join or to leave the organisation without undue pressure being exerted; secondly, the freedom of the individual at any stage to choose his or her own spiritual director, whether or not the director is a member of Opus Dei.

4. Initiative and activities of Opus Dei, within the diocese of Westminster, should carry a clear indication of their sponsorship and management.

I am confident that these four guidelines will in no way hinder Opus Dei in the apostolic work to which it has committed itself, but will help it to adapt to the traditional spirituality and instincts of our people.

I will naturally remain in close touch with priests and members of Opus Dei within the diocese of Westminster”.

Cardinal Hume, Archbishop of Westminster, 2 December, 1981.

APPENDIX D

My life a Numerary

As a Numerary, for over 20 years this was my “plan of life”, for prayer. These specific practices in the plan of life were called “norms.”

The plan consists of:

- **Morning offering.**
- **Daily Mass.**
- **The Rosary.** Sometimes it was hard to find the 15-20 minutes necessary, so especially in my early years, I prayed it on my fingers as a rode on my BSA Bantam and then Lanbretta.
- **Mental prayer.** Half and hour in the morning, half an hour in the evening.
- **The Angelus or Regina Coeli.** In traditional Catholic piety the Angelus is said at noon and at 6:00 pm. During the Easter season (Easter Sunday through Pentecost) we used to say the Regina Coeli instead.
- **Particular examination of conscience.**
- **Spiritual reading.** I used to spend about 15 minutes per day reading a spiritual book. Thanks to this, I became familiar with all the writings of St Theresa of Avila and St John of The Cross.
- **Reading of the New Testament.** I used to spend 3-5 minutes per day reading the New Testament. This enabled me to read the entire New Testament over the course of a year.
- **Visit to the Blessed Sacrament.**
- **Preces.** The Preces is a set of prayers members of Opus Dei say every day. It takes about 5 minutes to say them and they are prayed in Latin.
- **General Examination of Conscience.** Before going to bed at night we would spend about 3 minutes examining how I spent the day.
- **Weekly Confession.**
- **Aspirations.** The Father encouraged us to turn to the Lord many times during the day and say short prayers like “Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul” or “Jesus, I love you with all my heart. I liked Thomas’s and Peter” my Lord and my God, you know everything. You know that I love you.”

- **Days of Recollection.** Every month I attended a day of recollection. They consisted of two “meditations” preached by a priest, a short talk by one of the lay members on a virtue or a topic like “the good use of time,” benediction, confession, and time for personal prayer.
- **Retreats.** Every year I went on a week retreat. These were silent retreats with a number of preached “meditations,” plenty of time for personal reflection and prayer. Typically, I attended these at Wickenden Manor, Sussex.

This Plan of Life laid the foundations for my spirituality so that - forty years after leaving Opus Dei – I can now say that I resonate with St Paul's (Gal 2,20), “I live now, not I, Christ lives in me.”

