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Thirty-eight men lie prostrate during their ordination as priests for Opus Dei at the Basilica of St. Eugene in Rome, in this May 26, 2007, file photo. (CNS/Courtesy of Opus Dei)

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A few days before Christmas, several posts began to appear on an online community started by people who had once been members of Opus Dei. Most of the posts came from former numeraries: men and women who had once dedicated themselves to a life of chastity, poverty and obedience to a Catholic organization supposedly inspired by God. With the holidays approaching, they shared their memories of Christmases past alongside their brothers and sisters inside what was colloquially known as "The Work."

"Hell," was the single-word answer posted by one.

Another posted: "Non-stop work. Loneliness. Grief."

Others shared stories about how they weren't allowed to spend time with their blood relations on Christmas Day, even if they only lived around the corner. The rationale given to them by their "local director" — the head numerary tasked with watching over them and passing down orders from national headquarters — was that their *real* families were no longer their blood relations, but those they lived with at the Opus Dei residence. Any gifts received were collected and "redistributed" elsewhere.

The most painful stories were those of the numerary assistants: the "little sisters" who cooked and cleaned and served the numeraries — but who weren't allowed to walk on the street outside unaccompanied. Many came from poor families and were recruited at "hospitality schools" run by Opus Dei, where they were promised an education and a chance of a better life — only to be pushed into joining because that was what God "wanted" and to refuse him was to condemn their families to an eternity in hell.

One recalled watching her fellow students — those that hadn't yet been recruited — being sent home to their families while she was ordered to stay. She was just 16.

"We were told that we were going to be separated into two groups: those that could go home to celebrate Christmas with family and those who could go for New Year," she recalled. "I fell into neither category as I had already 'committed' to serving God and His sons."

Instead, she spent the holidays serving the numerary men — but was forbidden from speaking to them or even making eye contact. For the next few years, she pleaded to be allowed home for Christmas but was turned down. She eventually stopped asking.

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Such recollections are likely to come as a shock to many who have come into close contact with Opus Dei over the years. The organization has successfully inserted itself into the very fabric of American Catholicism: [the previous head](#) of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is an Opus Dei priest; the organization runs several schools across the country and is present near Ivy League campuses; it also offers spiritual guidance to some of the country's most influential Catholics.

There's good reason for this misapprehension: Opus Dei has been very successful at marketing itself over the years. It presents itself as nothing more than a group of devout Catholics who want to help others to live out their faith more deeply. Legitimized by the Vatican and granted a special — and wholly unique — status within the hierarchy of the church by Pope John Paul II, the organization has drawn thousands of American Catholics into its ranks by offering to help them delve deeper into their faith.

But there's an insidious underbelly to the organization that most members know little about. Opus Dei is at its core an alleged abusive cult that preys on vulnerable individuals and even children to fill its numerary ranks — the celibate men and women charged with doing all the work, that of recruiting ordinary married Catholics as members and providing them with spiritual direction. There are hundreds of numeraries in the United States. They live highly controlled existences in gender-segregated residences across the country.

The Vatican is well aware of this abuse and is currently reviewing a 2021 complaint lodged by dozens of women, who are former numeraries from Argentina and Paraguay. According to [The Associated Press](#), they allege labor exploitation and abuse of power and of conscience.

In 2024, federal [prosecutors in Argentina](#) accused Opus Dei of human trafficking and labor exploitation. The organization is accused of systematically seeking out adolescents and girls from impoverished communities, of coercing them into joining Opus Dei as "numerary assistants" — effectively unpaid domestic servants — and then trafficking them around the world. Prosecutors seek to summon four Opus Dei priests to testify, per AP.

[Related: Argentine prosecutors accuse Opus Dei leaders in South America of trafficking and labor exploitation](#)

Many American Catholics might feel they have benefitted greatly from their interactions with Opus Dei. But they should also be aware that the spiritual guidance it offers is built on a system of abuse, manipulation and deception towards its numerary members. Over the past five years, as part of research for [a book about Opus Dei](#), I have spoken to hundreds of former members and seen the damage the organization has inflicted. Opus Dei refuses to acknowledge that it has a problem — or even launch an investigation.

At this time of year, Christians come together to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Christmastide is also a time when we bid farewell to the old year — and welcome in the new one. It is a moment when many of us recognize our failings and make resolutions to do better. Pope Francis has issued two *motu proprios* in the past three years effectively giving Opus Dei a chance to recognize its own failings and do better. Both times it has failed to do so. The Vatican could launch a formal intervention in 2025.

If and when it comes, American Catholics cannot plead ignorance about the abuses of Opus Dei. Whatever spiritual benefits the organization brings individuals, no Christian can justify such personal gains if they are based on a system of abuse and manipulation towards others. Christmastide should be an opportunity for Americans to reassess their relationships with this abusive organization and ask whether the way that it treats its numerary and numerary assistant members has anything to do with the teachings of Jesus Christ.

[Related: Women in Argentina claim labor exploitation by Opus Dei](#)