

## Catholic group Opus Dei accused of recruiting children

Dozens of former members say organisation targets young teenagers to commit to strict religious life

Antonia Cundy in London 10 HOURS AGO



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Dozens of former Opus Dei members have accused the group of recruiting children in recent years, challenging the organisation's claims that it does not target minors.

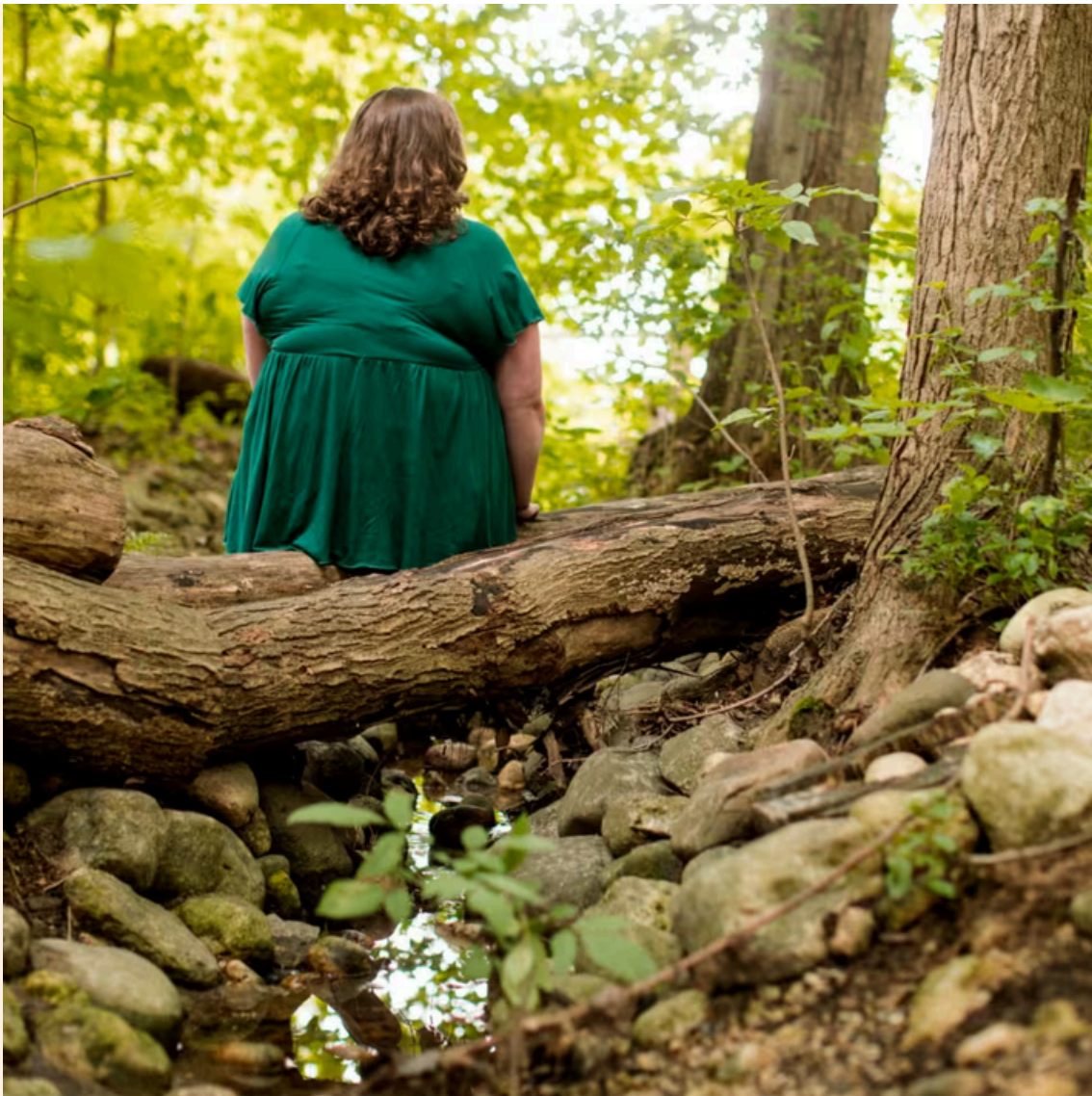
The individuals, the most recent of whom left the conservative Catholic group this year, told the Financial Times they were recruited as minors or witnessed targeted attempts over the past decade to draw under-18s into the group.

Many said young teens lined up for membership were also encouraged to adopt painful "corporal mortification" practices.

The former members — most of whom requested anonymity for fear of retaliation — said children were “groomed” through youth clubs, schools and community programmes linked to the organisation around the world, including in the US and Europe.

“Everything is done with a plan to recruit,” said one former member who was deputy director of a boys’ club in Colombia during the past five years.

“The ideal age when they put pressure on is around 14 and a half . . . They target the weak people, people who need something. The important thing is that they make you feel part of a group. And when you are young and a teenager with a lot of insecurities, this is really influential.”



'If I had more life experience I would have been more aware and would not have joined,' said one former Opus Dei member from the US, adding that she was 16 when she was pressured to join the group © Narayan Mahon/FT

Members of Opus Dei commit to a life of intense work, prayer and asceticism in accordance with the teachings of Josemaría Escrivá, a Spanish priest who founded the organisation in 1928 and was canonised in 2002.

Since 1982, Opus Dei's Vatican-approved statutes have banned anyone under the age of 18 from formally joining. But children aged 14 and a half or older can become "junior candidates" by writing a letter to the head of Opus Dei requesting admission. The process is known within the organisation as "whistling".

Opus Dei has insisted it does not pressure children to “whistle”, that the step requires parental consent and that “junior candidates” do not take on any obligations or responsibilities.

However, another former member said that when he attended a retreat run by Opus Dei — also known as “The Work” — in Ireland in 2016, he witnessed adult members discussing the targeted recruitment of children.

“It was the trigger for my leaving Opus Dei,” he said. “At a get-together about this boys’ football club that they ran . . . they started going through the names of the individual boys and how predisposed they might be to join.

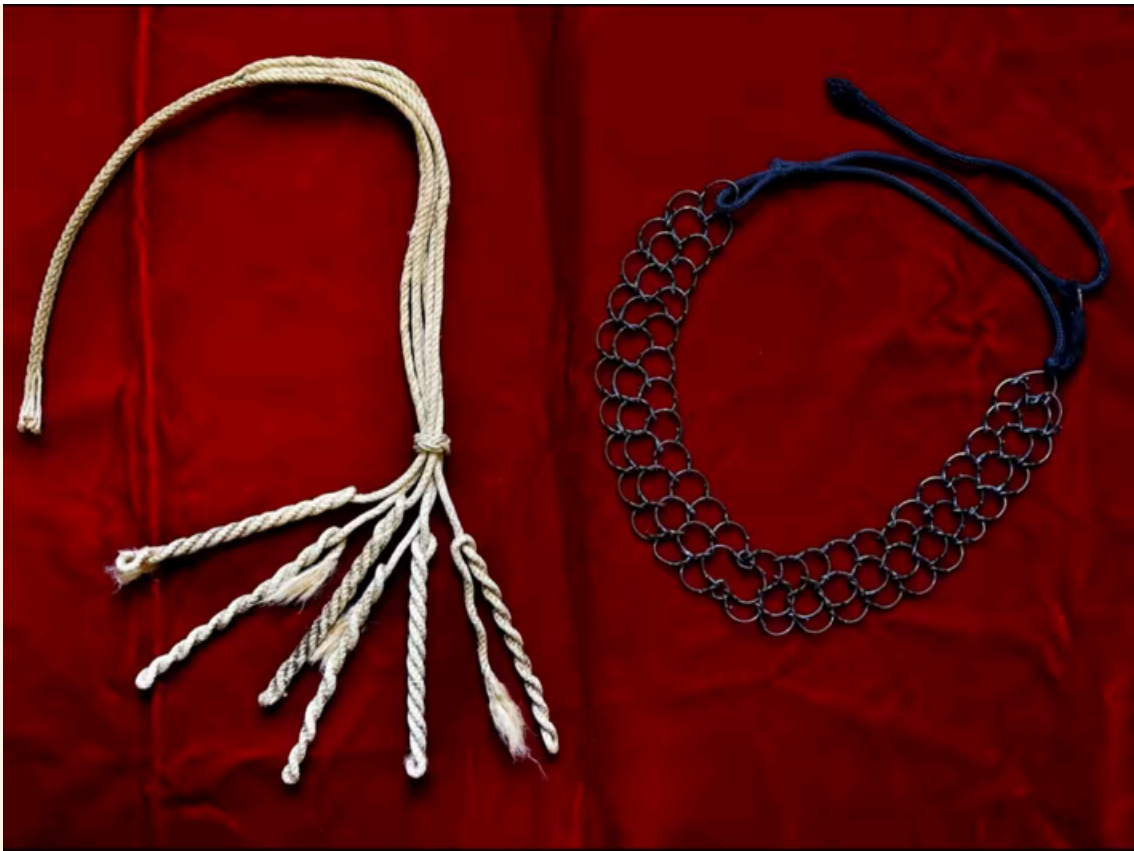
“It was: ‘Is this person close to the activities of The Work? Is that a person you could see ‘whistling’ in a year or two?’ It was that explicit.”

More than a dozen former members said minors were also encouraged to adopt practices such as corporal mortification, in which members wear a spiked metal chain called a “cilice” around the thigh or use a rope whip called a “discipline” on their body.

“Shortly after writing the letter, the director [of the centre] gives them to the boys. In other words, some kids start using them before they turn 15,” the former deputy director of the Colombian boys’ club said.

A former member from Kenya, who formally joined in 2006, said: “I was encouraged to use the cilice and discipline from the time I was 15 years old . . . We had to hide them from our family and friends.”

Opus Dei said use of the cilice and discipline by minors “used to happen in the past”, but it was “surprised” by claims that the practice was ongoing. There was no “explicit rule” on the matter but a “change of mentality” took place decades ago, it said.



More than a dozen former members said minors lined up to become Opus Dei members were encouraged to practice corporal mortification, such as using a rope whip called a 'discipline' on their body and wearing a spiked metal chain called a 'cilice' © Eric Vandeville/Gamma-Rapho/Getty Images

Many of the former members came forward after [an FT investigation earlier this year](#) into the labour exploitation of women and girls within Opus Dei — allegations that the organisation denied.

The group has 95,000 members worldwide, about a quarter of whom are celibate. Celibate members hold the most senior positions within Opus Dei.

Former members said children were particularly targeted as potential celibate recruits.

“It’s a grooming process that starts as early as 14,” said one former celibate member from Spain who requested to join Opus Dei in the early 2000s, when she was 14, and left nine years ago. “To suggest celibacy to a 14-year-old, how is that suitable?”

Another Spanish member, who left in 2016, said: “The experience of recruiting minors has been constant during the 42 years that I was in Opus Dei. Not just constant, but intense, planned, abusive and shameless.”

In a statement, Opus Dei said: “We wholly reject the claim that there is targeted recruitment of minors.”

The organisation added: “Seeking to acquire a deep faith from a very young age is not new. The Catholic Church has canonised people who discovered and followed their vocation from a very early age, such as St Thérèse of Lisieux”, a 19th-century Carmelite nun.



'I was often told that failing to follow my vocation would be a grave thing worthy of hell,' said one former member from Kenya, adding that she was encouraged to use the 'cilice' and 'discipline' from the age of 15 © Anna Gordon/FT

The allegations of child recruitment are the latest in a series of recent controversies surrounding the conservative Catholic group, which has long attracted scrutiny over its alleged secrecy and the influence of its membership in religious, political and business circles.

In 2021, 43 women in Latin America accused Opus Dei in a written complaint to the Vatican of trafficking and exploitation, claims that are being investigated by Argentine authorities. The women were “assistant numeraries”, a female-only category of members who dedicate themselves to domestic work at Opus Dei centres.

Earlier this year an FT investigation uncovered similar allegations in Europe, the US and Africa. Sixteen women said they were coerced as young girls from low-income backgrounds into decades of unpaid domestic service.

Opus Dei strongly denied the claims of exploitation and psychological control. The group highlighted its formal ban on under-18s joining and said a desire to join was reaffirmed multiple times over several years before a person is legally admitted.

But former members who came forward in response to the FT's investigation — including three more assistant numeraries — said, in practice, these rules were subverted. More than 20 individuals said they had been actively drawn into the group as children after 1982. A dozen said they had witnessed Opus Dei targeting children in the past 10 years.

They said individuals are treated as members as soon as they become “junior candidates”.

“From my experience, 14 and a half was the minimum age to ask for admission. There was nothing legal about asking for admission at that age, but it was this sense that you had said yes to God,” said a former member from the UK who left in the early 2000s.

“So whatever the legal side was, the formalities, it didn't matter: you had given your heart. And then the pressure kicks in to stay true.”

The former member from Spain who left in 2015 added: “Internally, we all know — the age we have in our mind is 14 and a half, and this is not written anywhere . . . They want people to join before they start getting influenced: puberty and being a grown-up, going out with friends, having sexual relations.”



Former members said that after “whistling” as minors they were expected to follow strict daily schedules of mass, prayer, meditation and study of Opus Dei principles.

“Legally, you are not [a member]. But you start to live with all this pressure and obligation — that if you leave you will go to hell because you are rejecting God’s call,” said the former youth club deputy director in Colombia.



Teena Fogarty, who first spoke to the FT as part of its original investigation, is one of five 'assistant numeraries' now bringing civil claims against Opus Dei for personal injury in the UK and Ireland © Nacho Hernandez/FT



Anne Marie Allen, another former 'assistant numerary' also featured in the FT's first investigation and has since reported her allegations of exploitation and abuse to the Irish police © Paulo Nunes dos Santos/FT

According to Opus Dei's statutes, after requesting to join, prospective members are "*ipso facto* admitted" as non-celibate members and can begin spiritual training.

"Junior candidates are clearly told they are not members of Opus Dei," the organisation's spokesperson said. "We are also ensuring that our junior candidates are sufficiently mature to make decisions as to their vocation through informed consent."

The spokesperson said "any coercion" would be "abhorrent and wholly contrary to our guidelines".

Institutions such as youth clubs and hospitality schools to which Opus Dei provides spiritual direction are known as its "corporate works". They are not owned by Opus Dei itself but typically by charities set up by its members.

The former member in Colombia said in the two years he worked at the youth club recently, five boys "whistled" as celibate members under pressure.

"They start to say, 'OK, come with us to pray,' and then the more [the boy] prays the nicer they are. And then they suggest he goes and talks to the priest in confession. So [the boy] receives all this attention and starts to feel like this is what he wants. And they start to manipulate and pressure him," he said.

In Peru, a former director of a hospitality school for girls told the FT she believed the main purpose of the school was to recruit assistant numeraries, the women who carry out domestic work in Opus Dei centres.

She said there was "no interest" in improving the education offering but "a lot of interest in indoctrinating" the pupils.

“They said the intention was to give them an education, to empower them, but the reality that I saw was the opposite. They were getting free labour to work in their centres,” she said. She left Opus Dei in 2021 after her attempts to reform the school were ignored.

Former members said Opus Dei had reformed its practices in some countries much more than in others. Two former members in the US said it was clear to them they were not full members, or able to act like it, until they were 18.

Another former member from the US, however, said she had “whistled” at 16 after attending an Opus Dei youth course in 2013. “I felt so much pressure that I had to [join] right away, that I couldn’t wait.”

She said the organisation took control of her finances. “They wanted my bank statements every month and whenever I got money to buy tampons or shampoo, I had to give them the receipts as well. That all felt wrong to me because it felt like I had no privacy.”

One US former member, who left this year, said: “One thing that could be improved is to make [reforms] more official: ‘This is how it used to be. This is what we’re now doing, because we want to avoid that again.’”

Five assistant numeraries who spoke to the FT as part of its investigation earlier this year are pursuing civil claims for personal injury in Ireland and the UK. One woman in Ireland has also reported her allegations, which date from the late 1970s to mid-1980s, to police. The Irish police did not respond to a request for comment.

Opus Dei’s spokesperson said the group could not comment on ongoing legal cases. The Vatican did not respond to a request for comment.

*If you have insight into the issues raised in this article, please contact [investigations@ft.com](mailto:investigations@ft.com) or [antonia.cundy@ft.com](mailto:antonia.cundy@ft.com). We want to hear from you*