

Canonised in 2002: Opus Dei founder Josemaria Escrivá. Photo by Opus Dei Rome/Getty Images



# ‘I came out suicidal’: the women speaking out after leaving Opus Dei

The Catholic organisation has been called a cult that exploits women. After a high-profile former Irish member shared a troubling account of her experience, **Sarah Mac Donald** hears that recent accusations are ‘the tip of the iceberg’

**‘W**e went through hell. Opus Dei has so much to answer for.”

Eileen Johnson, an 80-year-old grandmother, is recalling how her world fell apart when she prised herself free of the conservative group that remains one of the most influential players in Catholicism.

“When I read the founder Josemaria Escrivá’s words saying anyone who left should be considered dead and that he would not give five centimes for their soul, that was when my breakdown started,” she says.

She spends thousands on counselling after leaving Opus Dei, she says. Despite her best efforts, depression recurred periodically all her life; a legacy, she believes, of her time in the group.

She was a ‘numerary’ – that is, a celibate member who lives in a single-sex centre. At a time when most young adults enjoying their lives, she was struggling with depression and being treated in-house by Opus Dei members. When they eventually realised that they couldn’t ‘fix’ her, she was told her ‘vocation’ was no longer as a numerary and she should move out. She was 28.

“I came out suicidal. At one point I took an overdose – I am lucky to be alive. It was very difficult to put my life together; I was very deeply traumatised,” she says. “It was unethical for Opus Dei doctors and psychiatrists to be treating me with no access to medical people outside of the organisation.”

Johnson, who lives in Britain, recently wrote a letter to the *Financial Times* following its report on women who were once assistant numeraries in Opus Dei. They claim they endured years of exploitation. Two of those who are campaigning for justice are Irish former members Anne Marie Allen, the former prison governor, and Teena Fogarty.

Journalist Antonia Cundy spoke to 16 former

assistant numeraries who were part of the organisation from 1977 to 2020 across Europe, the US, Africa and Latin America. She recounts how, as young girls, Allen, Fogarty and other women from rural and working-class backgrounds were drawn in on the premise of enrolling for a training course. But it was in fact the prelude to being recruited by Opus Dei, which translates as Work of God.

Once they became assistant numeraries, they lived within a system of rigid control. Long hours of work were punctuated by prayer and mortification, including the use of a cilice, a spiked wire that bites into the thigh, for up to two hours a day, and flagellation with a bunch of braided ropes called a discipline.

When they left Opus Dei, some found they had been registered for only minimal social security contributions, and many for none at all. Most did not even have bank accounts. In Argentina, a lawyer who was a member of the group has taken up the case of 43 Latin American and Spanish assistant numeraries to secure redress.

Opus Dei disputes some of the allegations made in the *Financial Times* report in a response that can be read on its Irish website.

#### ULTRA-CONSERVATIVE

Jack Valero, a spokesman for Opus Dei in Britain, said in a statement to the *Irish Independent*: “Opus Dei is an organisation of the Catholic Church of people who want to do good, but it is not exempt from making mistakes. As with any organisation, while there may have been some bad experiences, there are also tens of thousands of members who love being in Opus Dei, and hundreds of thousands more who take part in the Christian formational activities we offer.”

“There are also thousands of former members who are happy with Opus Dei and continue coming to the activities it organises. That is not

to diminish the importance of people’s experiences, and it doesn’t mean Opus Dei can’t make mistakes. Everyone’s experiences are unique and valid, and if some people have felt wounded while they were in Opus Dei, we will sincerely ask them for forgiveness.”

Opus Dei operates a strict hierarchy, at the pinnacle of which is the Spanish founder, St Josemaria Escrivá (1902-1975). He was canonised by Pope St John Paul II in 2002, one of the speediest elevations in recent church history. Critics suggest this was thanks to Opus Dei’s wealth and the fact that the pontiff was a fan of the ultra-conservative group and was closely connected with it in his native Poland.

“John Paul II was in their pockets,” Johnson says. “He boosted their credibility tremendously and he greatly admired Escrivá.”

Lay people make up most of Opus Dei’s membership, and about 2pc are priests. The organisation, which was started in 1928 in Spain, has a men’s section and a women’s section. The lay members are divided into numeraries and assistant numeraries, who are celibate and live in centres of Opus Dei or “the Work” as they colloquially call it, and supernumeraries, who may be married or unmarried and live “in the world”.

The great majority of the estimated global membership of up to 90,000 are supernumeraries. The role of assistant numerary is open only to women. It entails, as Opus Dei puts it, attending “to the domestic needs of the centres of Opus Dei, both for the men and for the women. They do all the cooking and cleaning.” There are about 4,000 women around the world who “have chosen this vocation within the Catholic Church and live it out with love and commitment”, the group says.

Johnson recalls that in her time in Opus Dei, assistant numeraries were known as “maids” or “servants”. It was, she underlines, “an *Upstairs Downstairs* mentality” and most of these



roles were fulfilled by Irish or Spanish girls. “I joined in 1961 and I couldn’t understand why we had maids,” she says. “They looked like a throwback to Victorian times. But it was the Spanish influence. Escrivá himself was from a fairly humble background but when he became a priest, he spent time with some well-to-do people. One was a rich lady from Bilbao who had servants nicely dressed in black uniforms with starched white aprons. This became a model for him.”

Escrivá’s vision for Opus Dei thrived in Franco’s Spain and established itself in Ireland in the 1940s and ’50s.

For Johnson, the allegations made by the former assistant numeraries are “just the tip of the iceberg”. She hopes many more former members are ready to talk openly about what she considers to be a cult.

Support groups founded by ex-members, such as Opuslibros.org, allege that those who joined Opus Dei were subjected to controlling tactics such as the reading of their correspondence, being forced to seek permission to read certain books, the creation of distance between members and non-members including family, secrecy around membership, the concealment of the ‘real’ aims of ventures such as student residences and training colleges and the adulation for the founder.



**'I've been a lone voice in the wilderness': Eileen Johnson hopes more former members of Opus Dei are ready to talk openly.** Photo: Brian Sutherland

of International Cultic Studies Association in Manchester. There she crossed paths with Dr Steven Hassan, an American cult expert, who has an active interest in Opus Dei. "Steven has counselled former Opus Dei members and he has no hesitation in classifying Opus Dei as a cult," she says. "It is a cult and that is one of the reasons I went public with my story."

Jack Valero rejects this allegation and stresses that the group wouldn't have been approved by the Catholic Church if it were a cult.

According to Mike Garde, head of Dialogue Ireland, which raises awareness of cultic activity, families complained to him of aggressive recruitment practices by Opus Dei several years ago but he has heard nothing in recent years.

He expressed concern that Opus Dei facilities in Ireland tend to use innocuous names such as Aosóg and Brosna and that the scarcity of student accommodation and study facilities could be the moment a young person makes a choice that can lead to "the loss of their freedom and their education".

#### 'WHISTLEBLOWER'

He also questions whether those who participate in the "high-level media conferences" run by Opus Dei in Ireland — the Cleraun Media Conference — are aware of the organisation's involvement. The website of Opus Dei in Ireland lists its "activities" across the island including Rosemont Secondary School and Rockbrook Park Secondary School and Lismullin Cookery School in Co Meath.

Johnson believes there should be a compensation scheme for former assistant numeraries, but she also believes there should be compensation for those like herself scarred by their experience of the organisation. "They seriously jeopardised my professional development." She would like to see a root-and-branch investigation of Opus Dei.

Describing herself as a "whistleblower", Johnson said those who have gone public about their experiences of Opus Dei have been ignored, disrespected and, in some cases, "maligned or calumnised. We are generally regarded as unbalanced, or at best vengeful".

Back in 1991, she offered to meet Opus Dei and "if necessary, to be interviewed by a psychiatrist to demonstrate my sanity". Again in 2002, she offered to meet a representative of the women's section to talk things over, but they insisted "it would have to be at an Opus Dei house in London".

"Opus Dei had cut me off totally when I left, forbidding members to contact me, resulting in my being totally isolated, friendless and suicidal. It would have been traumatic for me to return to any of their centres. I stipulated that it [the meeting] would have to be somewhere neutral, so it didn't happen."

Valero said that it was "very sad" that Johnson's efforts to meet representatives in the past were unsuccessful and that her complaints were not dealt with. "We are very sorry and deeply regret that she was hurt by her time in Opus Dei. We are very surprised that no one was available to meet her in 1991 and 2002 as we have always tried to reach out to people in such situations. We have checked with those still alive who would have looked after things in those years, but nobody remembers her making contact, so we cannot comment further."

He said Opus Dei would like to hear directly from Johnson and Anne Marie Allen and Teena Fogarty because the organisation is interested in "sorting things out" and a protocol has been set up for dealing with the complaints of former members. Those who wish to take part in this listening and resolution process can make contact via [listening.ie@opusdei.org](mailto:listening.ie@opusdei.org).

"It has been a very lonely journey for me over these years," Johnson says, "because I've been a lone voice in the wilderness here in Britain. But it is amazing now — with the assistant numeraries going public, I feel part of something."

**One Irish girl protesting angrily to me about her status: 'Why can't we wear nice clothes like you, why can't we wear make-up like you why can't we go out unaccompanied?'**

"Escrivá was revered and idolised," says Johnson, who met him four times during her time in Opus Dei. "One of the first things I was told when I visited the Opus Dei place in Manchester was that he was a living saint. His every word was gospel. He stated that his aim was to recruit the aristocracy of blood, money and talent — to get the people at the top."

Despite her youth, Johnson was a member of the advisory office of the women's section of Opus Dei in London in the 1960s. She is well placed to understand the organisation's internal workings. "There was this dreadful divide between numeraries and assistant numeraries and I felt that acutely — it made me sick," she says. "Once a woman joined at that level of assistant numerary, that was their vocation. You didn't go up levels of membership."

As a numerary in London, Johnson was involved in setting up a training programme for Opus Dei's Lakefield centre in London. "I was also put in charge of hearing the confidences of the assistant numeraries in that house. There were two Spanish girls and two Irish. I vividly remember one Irish girl protesting angrily to me about their status. 'Miss Eileen, why can't we wear nice clothes like you, why can't we wear make-up like you, why can't we wear high heels, and why can't we go out unaccompanied by a numerary?'"



**Claims of exploitation: Anne Marie Allen, who was a prison governor**

"Personally, I have suffered deep spiritual abuse as a result of my membership of Opus Dei — it was not confined only to the assistant numeraries. We women numeraries went through hell as well.

"The *Financial Times* article quotes Anne Marie Allen recalling how she slept on the floor one night a week. We numeraries slept every night on the floor or on a board. I read the internal documents where Escrivá explained that the reason for women sleeping on the floor every night, and the men just one night a week, was because women are more sensuous than men."

Talking about her recruitment at the age of 16, she says: "I was a very pious young Catholic. Nearly every day at lunchtime I went to the school chapel.

"My French teacher was an Opus Dei numerary but she hadn't told anyone. She befriended me and made me feel special. Within a year she invited me to go to the Opus Dei house in Manchester to help teach English at the summer school. Within two weeks of arriving she told me she thought I had a vocation to join Opus Dei."

In July 2019, Johnson gave a talk about her experiences at the annual conference