Opinion
Guest Voices



Spanish Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, head of Opus Dei, answers questions during a media opportunity at the University of the Holy Cross in Rome on Jan. 24, 2017. (CNS/Paul Haring)

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When Pope Leo XIV summoned the leader of Opus Dei to see him last month, in one of his first official audiences, Vatican watchers immediately began to wonder what the meeting meant.

Some said it was a clear olive branch, a peace offering from a new pope who wanted to heal relations with a group they felt had been unduly attacked by Pope Francis.

Others said the urgency of the meeting betrayed the new pope's frustration over delays to the group's new statutes — first requested by Francis three years ago — and a signal that reforming Opus Dei was a clear priority.

Opus Dei quickly hailed the "closeness and affection" of the discussion.

Other readouts from the meeting seemed potentially more ominous.

"The Holy Father asked about the current study of the Statutes of the Prelature and listened with great interest to the explanations given," Opus Dei said in a statement about the audience.



Pope Leo XIV gives his blessing at the conclusion of his weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican on June 4, 2025. (CNS/Lola Gomez)

Three-year saga

The future of Opus Dei— and proposed statutes to be imposed on the group — have hung in the balance for three years since July 2022, when Francis announced his shock decision to impose sweeping changes to the operation of Opus Dei, the conservative, secretive and controversial Catholic group.

Francis explained that his decree — or *motu proprio — Ad Charisma Tuendum* was designed to "protect the charism" of the group, indicating that something had perhaps gone amiss. He ordered the group to rewrite its statutes and placed it under oversight of the Dicastery for Clergy.

While the timing of the unanticipated decision puzzled many at the time, it later emerged that the *motu proprio* had come just months after a formal complaint from 42 women in Argentina, who alleged that Opus Dei had coerced them — many of them as children — into joining the group as unpaid servants for its elite members known as numeraries.

Federal prosecutors in Argentina have since formally accused Opus Dei of human trafficking and serious labor violations. Four of its priests will stand trial in coming months.

Three years later, the new statutes still have not been implemented.

According to the Spanish newspaper El Diario Opus Dei has submitted two drafts but each has been rejected. In June 2023, dozens of former members from Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom filed another complaint against the group, alleging widespread abuse, the cover-up of criminal acts — including child abuse — and institutionalized fraud towards the church itself.

A few weeks later in 2023, Francis followed up with a second *motu proprio*, removing Opus Dei's authority over its lay members, stripping it of its ability to operate independently of local dioceses, and giving the Vatican critical powers to stage an intervention if it failed to act. The move was seen by many as a warning to Opus Dei to hurry up the process of rewriting its statutes, which were approved by Pope John

Paul II when the group was made into a personal prelature in 1982.

But progress since then has been slow. Some suspected the group was waiting out the end of the Francis papacy in hopes that a new pope would be more sympathetic to the conservative organization. Following the second motu proprio Tim Busch, co-founder of the Napa Institute and a prominent Opus Dei supporter, said it appeared Francis wanted to rein in the organization.

"I think he's tightening the noose, but I don't think he's going to have enough time," Busch said in an interview for the book, *Opus.* "Is the next pope going to succeed in doing the same thing? Or are they going to back off?"

With regards to the statutes, Opus Dei's Manuel Sanchez said, "All announcements will be made through our website when the time comes, in agreement with the Holy See."



Pope Francis is pictured with Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, left, the head of Opus Dei, and Msgr. Mariano Fazio, the auxiliary vicar of the prelature, during an audience at the Vatican Nov. 29, 2021. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Brought to heel

Just before he died, it looked as if Francis had finally brought Opus Dei to heel.

The group had finalized its new statutes and was about to put them to an internal vote — after which they were due to go back to the pope to be formally approved.

Within hours of Francis' death, that vote was canceled. Opus Dei said the decision was out of respect for the pope's passing: It still went ahead with other votes scheduled at that same meeting.

If Opus Dei leaders were hoping the next pope might be more amenable to weakening the reforms — or scrapping them entirely — then the election of Leo and his experience with another order with similar problems raises questions about that strategy. The first U.S. pope was closely involved in the suppression of Sodalitium Christianae Vitae, or the Sodalitium of Christian Life, a conservative Peruvian group that — like Opus Dei — was promoted by John Paul II. Francis, who counted Leo as a close adviser, ordered a formal suppression of the group earlier this year.

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Some former members who count themselves as critics believe that delays to the new statutes might backfire on Opus Dei.

"Pope Leo, letter or no letter, has clearly given Opus Dei a clear ultimatum and set a deadline that cannot be postponed," said Antonio Moya, a signatory to the second Vatican complaint who spent 42 years as an Opus Dei numerary — a celibate member who pledges obedience to the movement. "The farce they've been carrying on for three years now, which is longer than the entire Second Vatican Council, is now over."

Moya said the pact with Francis might turn out to be better than a new solution under Leo.

"Opus Dei is incapable of reforming itself. Its reform must come from the Holy See," Moya said. "Their collective arrogance prevents them from understanding what the church is, what it means to be Christian, and what personal and communal discernment is."

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Opus Dei was founded by the Spanish priest Josemaría Escrivá in 1928, after he was said to have received a vision from God for a new lay movement dedicated to helping ordinary Catholics to better serve God in their daily lives. The group, which currently has around 90,000 members in more than 60 countries around the world, has faced accusations about controversial practices, abuse of members and its targeting of the elite.

In 1982, Pope John Paul II made Opus Dei into a personal prelature, a new structure created at the Second Vatican Council primarily as a means of ordaining priests outside of the local diocese structure. It is the only personal prelature in the history of the church. The personal prelature status allowed the group to operate outside of the normal church hierarchy, meaning that local bishops and archbishops have no jurisdiction over the group.

The writer Dan Brown famously depicted a fictional version of Opus Dei as a dangerous, secret cult in his 2003 bestseller *The Da Vinci Code*.

Related: New book on Opus Dei is salacious, but fails to offer critical insight