News

Pope Francis meets Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz and Msgr. Mariano Fazio in 2021.

Pope Francis meets Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, left, the prelate of Opus Dei, and Msgr. Mariano Fazio, the auxiliary vicar of the prelature, during an audience at the Vatican Nov. 29, 2021. Federal prosecutors in Argentina have formally requested that Ocáriz, tOpus Dei's second-most senior official, be questioned about his role in the alleged enslavement and trafficking of 43 women over four decades. (CNS/Vatican Media)

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Federal prosecutors in Argentina have formally requested that Opus Dei's second-most senior official be summoned for questioning about his role in the alleged enslavement and trafficking of 43 women over four decades.

Prosecutors seek to question Msgr. Mariano Fazio, the Opus Dei auxiliary vicar and likely heir to the current leader, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz. Fazio is the most senior Opus Dei figure to be drawn into the case, which was brought by federal prosecutors in September after a two-year investigation.

The June 11 request by prosecutors is pending before an Argentinian judge.

Opus Dei, in response to the request, said in a statement that the group " categorically denies" any accusations of human trafficking or labor exploitation. It said that the conclusions of the prosecutors were a "complete decontextualization" of a "freely chosen vocation."

The case is expected to draw strong interest from the Vatican because Pope Leo has

inherited a review of Opus Dei that Pope Francis initiated. Leo met with Ocáriz May 14 at one of his first official audiences.

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Four Opus Dei priests were initially named in the case in September because of their roles as regional vicars of Argentina at the time the alleged crimes occurred. Fazio, who was regional vicar from 2010 to 2014, was not named at the time — but prosecutors said that evidence has since emerged that shows his involvement

Federal prosecutors accused Opus Dei of overseeing a "deceptive system that specifically targeted girls — some as young as twelve — from poor backgrounds, according to a formal outline of the case submitted in September to Argentina's National Criminal and Federal Correctional Court No. 3.

Girls were recruited with "false promises" of a better education and work opportunities, prosecutors alleged.

The girls were known in Opus Dei as numerary assistants, a female-only category previously known as numerary servants until they were rebranded in the 1960s. Such members are expected to cook and clean for the elite "numerary" members and priests — for up to 14 hours a day, seven days a week, according to the women's testimonies.

Recruits were subjected to "grueling workdays without pay" and deprived of "basic labor rights," prosecutors alleged in the outline of the case. The organization moved them between cities and across international borders, often without being consulted, they said.

"The role given to these women was explained using dogma that sought to justify their situation," prosecutors said in their 136-page report following a two-year investigation. The practice amounted to servitude, they said.

"It was enforced through various forms of violence, including psychological, economic, and even physical violence," prosecutors said in the report.

"These facts constitute a pattern of systematic and deliberate misrepresentation and exploitation of minors, with the aim of recruiting them to work in precarious conditions and under the false promise of education and vocational training," they said.

Similar allegations have also surfaced in Mexico and in Europe.

Opus Dei has previously said that Argentinian authorities approved the schools and denied that the girls were coerced into joining the lay Catholic group on promises of education, and that they freely chose to become numerary assistants. The statement said the females were paid for work and reaffirmed their membership several times over the years.

Read full document:
Document
Sept 2024 Investigation Request (Spanish).pdf

The investigation by federal prosecutors, which was conducted in conjunction with Argentina's Public Prosector for the Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons, came after the 43 women lodged a complaint with Opus Dei in 2020 about missing social security contributions dating back decades. The women were members of Opus Dei between 1974 and 2015.

When that went nowhere, the women filed a complaint with the Vatican — specifically to the abuse section of the Dicastery of the Doctrine of the Faith — in September 2021. The complaint detailed the alleged systematic abuse of women at Opus Dei residences in Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, Italy and Kazakhstan.

The document sent to the Vatican named both Ocáriz and Fazio as being ultimately responsible for the alleged abuse because of their lead roles in Opus Dei. They were accused along with at least 24 Opus Dei priests. A few months later, Pope Francis issued an order for Opus Dei to reform and rewrite its statutes.

The process of rewriting Opus Dei's statutes is still ongoing. And both Ocáriz and Fazio remain in their positions. The two men met with Leo on May 14 to discuss the ongoing reforms – three years after they were first ordered. Opus Dei submitted its revised statutes for approval by the pope on June 11.

Read full document:
Document
Fazio Investigation Request (Spanish).pdf

The decision to formally add Fazio to the case comes after one Bolivian woman, who said she was pressured into joining as a teenager and who was part of Opus Dei for

31 years, testified that he had ultimate responsibility in Argentina between 2010 and 2014, the report said. The woman also testified that she personally cleaned his rooms.

"I walked around the streets thinking I didn't want to live anymore," she testified. Opus Dei sent her to a doctor they chose. She was given antidepressants and sleeping tablets and told to "think of the father" — referring to the Opus Dei founder Josemaría Escrivá.

In its statement, Opus Dei said, "We believe it is necessary and important that the individuals mentioned in this accusation be able to exercise their right to defense and be allowed to present their version of events for the first time, in order to definitively clarify this situation."

Opus Dei did not respond to specific questions asking whether Fazio would remain in his post — or whether he would agree to being questioned by the court. The four other Opus Dei priests named in the case are yet to be called to testify in the case.

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