Culture
Book Reviews
Opus Dei's founder, Fr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, pictured in this undated photo

Opus Dei's founder, Fr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, pictured in this undated photo, started the conservative and notoriously secretive Catholic group in 1928 in Spain. Escrivá died in 1975 and was canonized as a saint in 2002. (OSV News/Courtesy Opus Dei)



by Sarah Mac Donald

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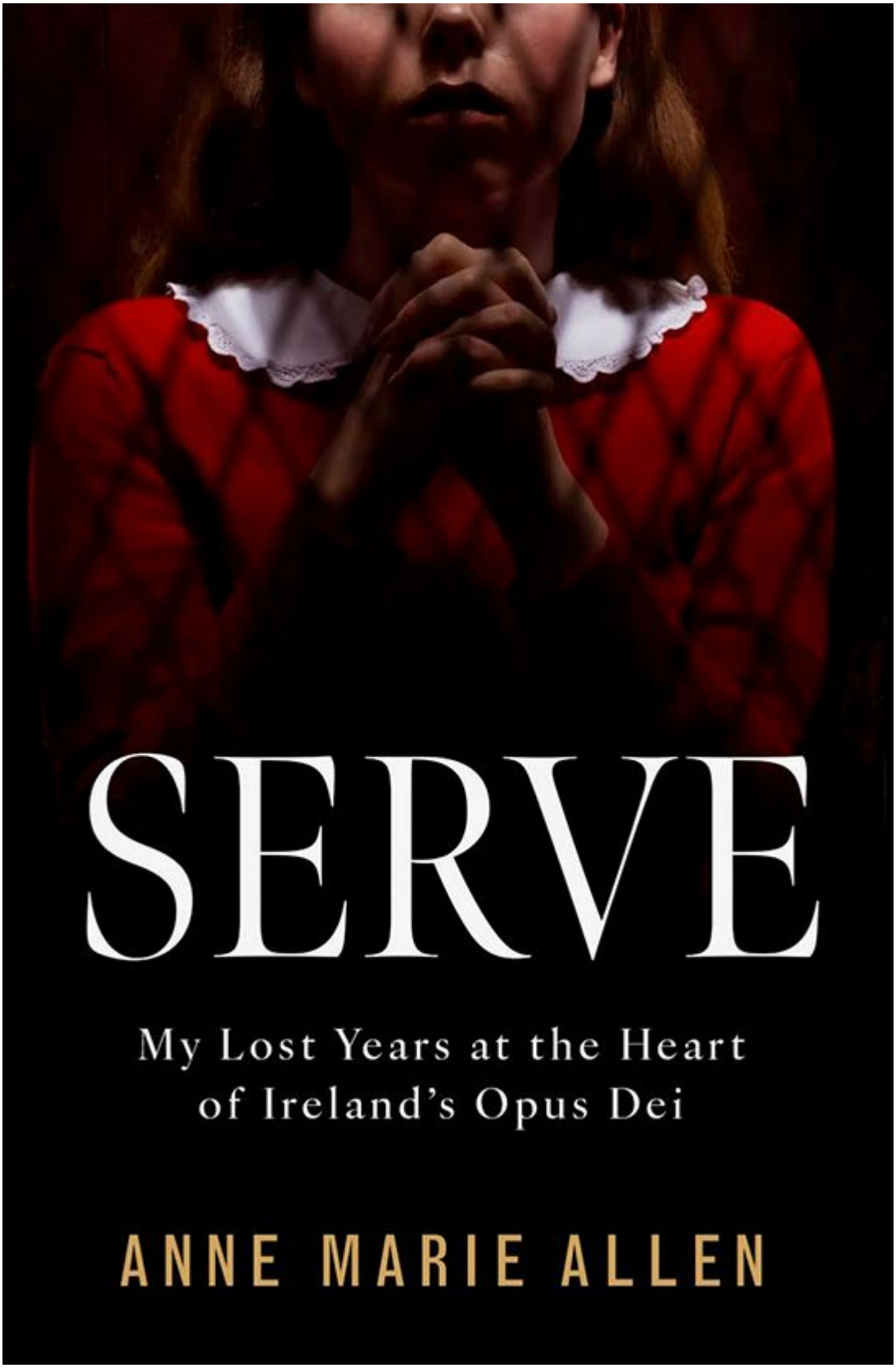
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An ex-assistant numerary, Anne Marie Allen held the lowest rank of Opus Dei's hierarchical structure, where she spent almost seven years with the conservative Catholic group in Ireland starting when she was 15.

"I think it is the voice of the weakest that will bring Opus Dei down," Allen says matter-of-factly.



Serve: My Lost Years at the Heart of Opus Dei
Anne Marie Allen
288 pages; Gill Books
$25.99

In *Serve: My Lost Years at the Heart of Opus Dei*, the 62-year-old documents the domestic servitude which she and other Irish women say they were lured into with the promise of vocational training. Her criticism of Opus Dei, including that the promised training never materialized, echoes that of other ex-numerary assistants around the world, including in Argentina, where a criminal investigation involves 43 former members who say they were trafficked and exploited.

Opus Dei is a conservative and notoriously secretive Catholic group founded in 1928 in Spain by Fr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás (1902-1975). Dogged by controversy from the beginning, the group's stated aim is to help lay and clerical members sanctify their daily lives. While this mission has resonated with a post-Vatican II church, critics say Opus Dei seeks to influence the powerful and wealthy in order to increase its own access to the levers of power within both the church and society. This blending of faith and political lobbying has been particularly strong in the United States and Spain.

Assistant numeraries — Opus Dei's lowest rank — are women who primarily attend to the domestic needs, including cooking and cleaning, of the organization's centers. The women live and work under obedience to Opus Dei, and commit to celibacy and sanctifying their lives.

Opus Dei is believed to have 90,000 members in up to 70 countries, though exact figures are illusive due to the group's discretion — or secrecy, depending on your viewpoint.

Pope John Paul II canonized Escrivá as a saint in 2002.

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims pack St. Peter's Square and nearby streets during the canc

Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims pack St. Peter's Square and nearby streets during the canonization of Opus Dei founder Msgr. Josemaria Escriva de Balaguer Oct. 6, 2002, at the Vatican. (CNS/Reuters)

Ex-numerary assistants who belonged to Opus Dei in the 1970s, '80s and '90s have claimed that they were forced to work up to 12 hours a day, cooking and cleaning for elite members without pay. The allegation has recurred in Ireland, Peru and Spain and was the subject of the Financial Times' 2024 special investigation into 16 former assistant numeraries, including Allen.

Allen's book is believed to be the first English-language account of the harsh conditions endured by assistant numeraries. This firsthand account also exposes Opus Dei's recruiting methodologies.

Many of the girls (only females could join this lowly rank) were under 18 when recruited and committed to Opus Dei without their parents' knowledge or consent.

"I was 17 at this stage, a kid even in those days, not able to make my own choices," Allen tells NCR. "Opus Dei never spoke to my parents about the move, never asked for their approval, let alone consent."



Anne Marie Allen, seen as an Opus Dei assistant numerary in Ireland in December 1983, left the group in 1985 (Courtesy of Anne Marie Allen)

Every aspect of the girls' lives was controlled: Letters and phone calls were censored, everything revolved around domestic work, prayer and self-mortification with a cilice (spiked metal chain worn on the thigh) and the discipline (a whip).

In hindsight, Allen believes that part of the way Opus Dei managed to control the assistant numeraries was through their demanding work schedule.

"There was no time to think in the organization," she says. "I was just another drone. I plodded through every week, each day a replica of the one before."



Anne Marie Allen has written "Serve," a memoir of the seven years she spent in Opus Dei. (Courtesy of Anne Marie Allen)

When serving the male numeraries their food, the girls wore black dresses, black hair bands, white aprons, white cuffs and white collars.

"I don't remember turning 17, 18, 19 or 20, but I remember going between centers in Ireland, to do the same monotonous duties seven days a week, for years," Allen says. "[It was] seven days a week, morning until night, silently cleaning for no pay, trafficked, enslaved and unhappy."

Assistant numeraries have alleged in Argentina and elsewhere that Opus Dei trafficked them.

In *Serve*, Allen recalls attending the "so-called two-year course" at Ballyglunin Park in County Galway when she was 16, while other girls in the course were being brought to Rome.

"I was told, 'You're to tell your parents you have won a scholarship to go to work in an exclusive center of Opus Dei, and that this is a very unique opportunity,' " she says. "So I wrote to my parents. I wasn't going to be home for Easter, nor was I going to Rome."

Opus Dei's founder, Fr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, is pictured with children in this

Opus Dei's founder, Fr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer y Albás, is pictured with children in this undated photo. (OSV News/Courtesy Opus Dei)

In 1980, Opus Dei sent Allen to Dublin, where she worked from 8 a.m. until 9 p.m. at the Riversdale Center for the 10 days of Easter. The then 17-year-old was told to lie to her parents.

"The only reason I was there was because they needed free domestic labor," she says. "So is that trafficking? I think it is. My parents were lied to. I was told to lie."

Assistant numeraries "were not paid," Allen says. "We had to ask for everything, even small things. Everything was watched and counted, and if you had a special request it would be mulled over like you were asking for a loan of thousands and usually denied: Even things like hairclips were major asks."

Numeraries, on the other hand, "had full wardrobes filled with lovely modern clothes," she says. "I knew they did, because I cleaned their bedrooms."

Brian Finnerty, U.S. spokesman for Opus Dei, poses inside the international Catholic organizat

Brian Finnerty, U.S. spokesman for Opus Dei, poses inside the international Catholic organization's New York headquarters with a digital photograph of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in 2006. (CNS/Todd Plitt)

Allen recalls how another assistant numerary introduced her to mortification of the flesh, a practice in which people deliberately hurt themselves as a sign of obedience and penance. She says the woman, Miss O'Rourke, gave her a small linen bag with a drawstring and a small tag. O'Rourke pulled out a small twisted rope, like a thick

plait that had come loose on one end. It looked like a horse whip.

" 'This is for your mortifications,' " Allen recalls O'Rourke telling her. "I stared at her. I knew what the word meant; she had told me before it was the reason she had no mattress. It was the reason I had cold showers, too."

Inside the bag was a cilice: a metal chain with metal spikes and a clasp holding it together.

"It looked like something you would put on an animal," Allen recalls. "I'd seen something like that on the neck of a dog." The woman told her she would wear the cilice on her leg for two hours a day. Allen complied.

Opus Dei rejects the allegations of abuse and trafficking. "The family is fundamental to Opus Dei, and not only does the Prelature seek to involve families in the lives of its members, but also to care for their well-being, spiritually and materially, if necessary," U.K. Opus Dei spokesperson Jack Valero said in a January statement.

Msgr. Fernando Ocariz talks to the press.

Spanish Msgr. Fernando Ocariz, head of Opus Dei, answers questions during a media opportunity at the University of the Holy Cross in Rome Jan. 24, 2017. He was elected and confirmed by Pope Francis as prelate of Opus Dei a day earlier, (CNS/Paul Haring)

Valero said such accusations "describe a lifestyle which does not accord with reality. They [assistant numeraries] receive remuneration for their work, like any citizen, and health benefits according to what each country can offer. Moreover, efforts are made, as in all Opus Dei centers, to ensure that the houses where members live (and in some cases work) provide a welcoming environment with facilities for rest, recreation, reading, and study."

But according to Allen, Valero's comments refer to how Opus Dei treats assistant numeraries today. "I have a moral responsibility to warn people and highlight religious servitude," she says, adding that Opus Dei cannot sweep their past failings under the rug.

Change for Allen began when her father became aware of a 1981 letter from the late Cardinal Basil Hume of Westminster Archdiocese in Britain in which Hume challenged Opus Dei's recruitment practices and insisted that no one under age 18

should be allowed to join the group. Hume also insisted that younger members must discuss the matter with their parents or guardians first. Allen was 18 at the time.

Opus Dei Fr. Charles Trullols carries the monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament at the start

Opus Dei Fr. Charles Trullols carries the monstrance with the Blessed Sacrament at the start of a Eucharistic procession through the streets of Washington May 18, 2024. (OSV News photo/Katie Yoder, Our Sunday Visitor)

While Hume had no jurisdiction in Ireland, two Irish bishops were contacted by a family member about Allen's situation. One was the now disgraced Bishop Eamon Casey; the other was Bishop Michael Smith of Meath Diocese, where Opus Dei would later establish the Lismullen Centre and Cookery School. Casey allegedly did write to Allen, she was told by a numerary, but the letter was confiscated. Smith visited her in Lismullen, but nothing came of that interaction, she says.

John Paul II in 1982 promulgated Ut Sit, making Opus Dei a personal prelature, making its leader the pastor to all members and clergy of the organization, no matter where they lived, rather than the typical structure in which a bishop normally has authority over a territory or diocese.

Pope Benedict XVI blesses a newly installed statue of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in an

Pope Benedict XVI blesses a newly installed statue of St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in an exterior niche of St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Sept. 14, 2005. (CNS/L'Osservatore Romano)

Allen says this structure has allowed Opus Dei to operate outside church structures and authority. The personal prelature has roots in Vatican II's consideration of public clerical associations; the prelature is structured in a hierarchical manner, with a prelate who is its head and priests and deacons who are secular clergy to assist the prelate.

Opus Dei is the only personal prelature in the Catholic Church.

Allen believes Pope Francis attempted to address this unique situation with his 2022 apostolic letter *Ad Chrisma Tuendum*. In it, Francis said the Dicastery for Clergy, not the Congregation for Bishops, would govern personal prelatures. The debate over

the canonical status of Opus Dei and the emphasis on the juridical standing of its clergy and prelate has left some of the group's lay members, numeraries, super numeraries and assistant numeraries grappling with the implications of their own nebulous status.

According to Allen, assistant numeraries like her were told they had vocations. Yet she now questions how that was possible for Opus Dei to claim when it wasn't a religious institute or congregation and it was founded in 1928, long before its personal prelature status.

Pope Leo XIV faces major test over Opus Dei reforms

Allen would like to see an inquiry set up to examine the allegations of former assistant numeraries in Ireland, but insists it cannot be a listening commission by Opus Dei.

"A church inquiry in Ireland, or a church inquiry by the Vatican, starting off with the assistant numeraries is essential," she says.

Allen and another former numerary, Michael Chambers, recently met Jesuit Bishop Alan McGuckian of Down and Connor Diocese in Northern Ireland. The bishop listened "intently" as she recounted her experiences, she says.

In 2024, Allen approached the Archdiocese of Tuam's safeguarding office to lodge a complaint about her time in Opus Dei as a minor at Ballyglunin Park in County Galway. She spoke with Fr. Francis Mitchell and explained that the group was not a prelature during much of her time in it. At the time, it was under the Archdiocese of Tuam and therefore the archdiocese should investigate. Mitchell suggested that she email a written complaint.

"I found the interaction deeply disappointing," she says, adding that she is considering contacting the National Board for Safeguarding Children in the Catholic Church in Ireland.

An NBSCCCI spokesman told NCR Opus Dei's operations in Ireland were audited on safeguarding in November 2015. The spokesman also said the group "has not received complaints in respect of numerary assistants."

After leaving Opus Dei on March 19, 1985, at age 22, Allen subsequently had a successful managerial career in the Irish Prison Service. But, she told NCR, her

experience with Opus Dei "had a huge impact" on her life. After she left, members "stalked" her and her family, she says.

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"There was 20 years of chaos after I left Opus Dei, trying to adjust to the world because I was removed from it for such a formative part of my life," she says. "There was a honeymoon period, where everything was fantastic and then after about a year and a half, I started to nosedive; I really couldn't cope with the world."

At times, Allen says, she was suicidal. "There were some very tough and very dark times."

Allen considers Opus Dei a cult. Others have made the same accusation. She refers to Steven Hassan's BITE Model of Authoritarian Control and a cult's methods to recruit and maintain control over people, including control over behavior, information, thought and emotional expression.

She has sent a copy of her book to Pope Leo XIV, who as a bishop took over the Diocese of Chiclayo in Peru in 2014 from a bishop affiliated with Opus Dei.

"I am asking him to fight for ex-members and assistant numeraries in particular," she says. She hopes Serve will raise "awareness about religious servitude and slavery" and that ex-members of Opus Dei will realize they are not alone and can heal together.

"I would like to help current members that are unhappy — and I know many are unhappy — realize that there is a wonderful, fabulous, brilliant world beyond Opus Dei's hell."

A version of this story appeared in the **Oct 24-Nov 6, 2025** print issue under the headline: Former Opus Dei numerary’s memoir claims abuse.